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4 GOINGS ON

15 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
David Remnick on the press in Israel; Slick Rick's crown jewels; coaching Zendaya; the art of party crashing; fame games.

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

Sarah Stillman 22 The Right to Hug
How counties profit from ending jail visitation.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Paul Rudnick 27 Neighborly

PERSONAL HISTORY

John McPhee 28 Tabula Rasa
Wordle, wills, and working seizures.

A REPORTER AT LARGE

Rachel Aviv 34 Conviction
Did a neonatal nurse really kill seven newborns?

PROFILES

Alexandra Schwartz 50 The Instigator
Miranda July turns the lights on.

FICTION

André Alexis 60 "Consolation"

THE CRITICS

A CRITIC AT LARGE

Kathryn Schulz 68 *The delights of the Westminster Dog Show.*

BOOKS

Benjamin Wallace-Wells 73 *Class consciousness for billionaires.*

75 Briefly Noted

Jerome Groopman 77 *Are we thinking about memory all wrong?*

MUSICAL EVENTS

Alex Ross 80 *Revisiting composers suppressed by the Nazis.*

ON TELEVISION

Inkoo Kang 82 *"Baby Reindeer," "Under the Bridge."*

POEMS

Ocean Vuong 40 "Theology"

Ange Mlinko 54 "Radishes"

COVER

Barry Blitt "Class of 2024"

DRAWINGS *Kendra Allenby, Edward Steed, Asher Perlman, Benjamin Schwartz, Lynn Hsu, Avi Steinberg, Mick Stevens, P. C. Vey, Roz Chast, Daniel Kanhai, Frank Cotham, Lars Kenseth, Tim Sniffen, Ellis Rosen, Ken Krimstein, Niall Maher* SPOTS *Meghan Linehan*

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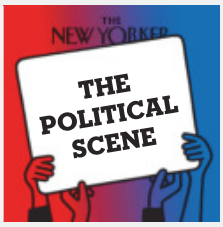

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

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Neal Katyal on why Supreme Court oral arguments—and Donald Trump's criminal trial—should be televised.

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Mary Grimm on swimming with her two daughters and the hard lessons of young motherhood.

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LEFT: JEENAH MOON / GETTY; RIGHT: GRACE J. KIM

THE MAIL

WHEN CARS FLY

As a longtime observer of the proponents of so-called flying cars, I read Gideon Lewis-Kraus's piece with some amusement ("Flight of Fancy," April 22nd & 29th). Flying cars have faced five technological hurdles since the earliest days of the concept: they cannot be effectively controlled by anyone but a skilled pilot; they are too noisy (heard any silent helicopters lately?); they can't carry enough fuel for any but the briefest journeys; they require too much energy use per passenger, per mile; and they don't offer a reasonable level of safety for pilots, passengers, or those on the ground. These were the same five hurdles faced by the inventor Paul Moller, who has made protracted efforts to devise a Skycar since the mid-twentieth century; since then, only one impediment has to an extent been overcome. Autopilot, or at least highly assisted flight control that enables non-skilled pilots to fly, is no longer a fantasy. Otherwise, very little has changed since the first Skycar of the nineteen-sixties, and, short of earthshaking breakthroughs in physics, at least two of the original hurdles are likely insurmountable.

Flying cars are a topic best discussed by starting with their obstacles and impossibilities, not with whatever tech bro has the best virtual-reality presentation and a barely working prototype. The field, such as it is, remains approximately where it was the last time I had a first-hand view of it, in the nineties, with Moller's Skycar attached to an immense crane, from which he would fly it in circles on a cable.

James Gifford
Aurora, Colo.

LIVING LONGER

Dhruv Khullar's article about longevity demonstrated the misaligned incentives of our health-care system ("No Time to Die," April 22nd & 29th). Who wouldn't want to improve the quality of our lives as we age? But the longevity evangelist Peter Attia seems concerned only with longevity for a few, while others lack basic medical attention. Americans give lip service to preventive medicine but do not support primary care, even though studies have shown that communities with more primary-care physicians per capita have better health outcomes. In Cleveland, where for almost forty years I was a family practitioner, the hospital system where I trained closed the family-medicine residency at its urban academic campus and around the same time opened a state-of-the-art physical-therapy facility at a suburban one.

Ezekiel Emanuel, the health-policy professor whom Khullar interviews, is correct that longevity for all would be better enhanced by a focus on people without access to basic medical services rather than on those who are obsessed with living longer. Health care in our country is fragmented, and the entry of private equity and profit-oriented companies has not benefitted patients. A cohesive and humane public policy would improve and lengthen many more lives than the targeted, expensive, and questionable interventions that Attia prescribes for his well-heeled clients.

Richard Weinberger
Solon, Ohio

I enjoyed Khullar's balanced discussion of Attia's theories and methods of healthy aging, even as I wondered whether the extra years would be worth the effort. I was reminded of my long-deceased mother's philosophy of living, aging, and dying: "If you only eat healthy foods, force yourself to exercise even when you don't feel like it, and don't smoke, drink, or party, you can live to be a hundred. At least, it will seem like a hundred."

Bob Keefe
Webster Groves, Mo.

•

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GOINGS ON

SUMMER PREVIEW

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this season.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

A Philharmonic Farewell, "Inside Light"

The summer season begins with a departure, when the **New York Philharmonic's** music director, Jaap van Zweden, steps down, after six years. His final programs, laden with symbolism, shift from the mournful drama of Mozart's Requiem (select dates May 23-28) to the new-day promise of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony (June 6-8), at David Geffen Hall.

Having wrapped its subscription season, the orchestra basks in the sunshine of the city's parks and of **Randall Goosby's** violin tone in free al-fresco performances of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, led by Thomas Wilkins (June 11-14). The **Metropolitan Opera** also tours the boroughs with its free outdoor recital series (select dates June 18-28).

At the Park Avenue Armory, the cavernous Drill Hall is set aglow for a spatial installation called **"Inside Light,"** which allows audiences to experience a nearly five-hour sliver of Karlheinz Stockhausen's mammoth twenty-nine-hour cycle, "Licht" (select dates June 5-14).

With the Met and the Philharmonic away, Lincoln Center's tracts of travertine won't lie fallow. The classically trained drag queens **Sapphira Cristál** and **Monét X Change** intermingle Mozart and Bizet with sequins and falsetto high notes for "Soundcake," which opens Lincoln Center's **"Summer for the City"** programming (June 12). At David Geffen Hall, Jonathon Heyward conducts the newly renamed **Festival Orchestra of Lincoln Center,** formerly the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, in his first season as music director, showcasing the ensemble's usual blend of new and comfortingly familiar works (select dates July 20-Aug. 10).

Intrepidness prevails at Little Island. The countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo** whirls through all the roles of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" in a ninety-minute adaptation (select dates Aug. 30-Sept. 22). **Davóne Tines** honors the legendary voice and activism of Paul Robeson (June 26-29). **Suzan-Lori Parks, Cécile McLorin Salvant,** and the mordant chanteuse **Justin Vivian Bond** each designs a week of events for a free curators' series.

On the Baroque side, the deeply expressive **Augustin Hadelich** plays violin concertos for the **Orchestra of St. Luke's** Bach festival (June 18), and **TENET Vocal Artists** brings its own Bach project—a decade-long dash through his oratorios—to a rousing finish, with the Mass in B Minor, at St. Jean Baptiste Church (June 1). Moving into the Classical and early Romantic eras, the **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** performs diaphanous Mendelssohn and Mozart pieces (select dates July 9-27).

Out of town, the eccentric nineteenth-century visionary Hector Berlioz is the focus of the **Bard Music Festival,** in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., which opens with a pairing of his evergreen "Symphonie Fantastique" and its rarer sequel, "Lélio" (Aug. 9). **Rhiannon Giddens**—the folk singer-songwriter, Pulitzer Prize-winning opera composer, and banjo picker on Beyoncé's "Texas Hold 'Em"—plays songs from her new album at **Caramoor** (Aug. 3), in Katonah, N.Y., which also hosts the adventuresome vocal ensemble **Roomful of Teeth** (June 28) and **Les Arts Florissants's** touring production of Purcell's "The Fairy Queen" (July 20).

At Tanglewood, in the Berkshires, the **Boston Symphony Orchestra** plunges into the sumptuous depths of German Romanticism in a tantalizing program of Richard Strauss's orchestral music, with the soprano **Renée Fleming** (July 7), and Act III of Wagner's "Götterdämmerung," with **Christine Goerke** as Brünnhilde (July 20). The **Philadelphia Orchestra** nestles into its summer home, in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., with the bombastic majesty of Strauss's "Alpine Symphony" (Aug. 8).

—Oussama Zahr

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JACKSON GIBBS

THE THEATRE

Bardic Fairy Dust, "Titanic" Riffs, "Oh, Mary!" on Broadway

After a breakneck spring—a year's worth of Broadway openings in just a few weeks—much of this summer will seem drowsy. During the dead of August, for instance, almost nothing is stirring. Early summer, though, is rife with offerings: Raja Feather Kelly's **"The Fires"**—a time-hopping drama about the erotic lives of three Brooklyn men—flickers at SoHo Rep (now in previews); Alexis Scheer's **"Breaking the Story,"** starring Maggie Siff as a war correspondent, premières at Second Stage (starting previews May 16); and the great Sandra Oh is at Atlantic Theatre Company in **"The Welkin"** (May 16), Lucy Kirkwood's much anticipated feminist thriller about an eighteenth-century Englishwoman facing down her mobcapped peers. Atlantic Stage 2 hosts Shayan Lotfi's sibling drama, **"What Became of Us"** (May 17), which rotates two starry duos: some nights, BD Wong and Rosalind Chao; others, Tony Shalhoub and the divine Shohreh Aghdashloo.

If you're looking for something experimental, your first stop should be Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival: T. Adamson's **"Usus"** (May 16-28), Bailey Williams's **"Coach Coach"** (June 3-13), and Crystal Finn's **"Find Me Here"** (June 19-29) are all must-sees. The Bushwick Starr puts on Michelle J. (Micha) Rodriguez's musical **"Presencia,"** which millennial-izes the Moses story (Connelly Theatre; June 11-29), and St. Ann's Warehouse welcomes **"Dark Noon"** (June 7-July 7), a South African burlesque of the American Wild West—a discovery from last year's Edinburgh Fringe. The Brick brings back the hit solo show **"Never Let Go: An Unauthorized Retelling of James Cameron's Titanic"** (May 22-June 1), in which Michael Kinnan plays all the parts of the titular film; it should pair nicely with **"Titanic"** (City Center; June 11-23), an Encores! staging of Peter Stone and Maury Yeston's 1997 musical. That cast is packed to the portholes—Jose Llana, Chuck Cooper, Ramin Karimloo, and Bonnie Milligan, *ahoy*.

Speaking of splashy shows, Kenny Leon directs a Broadway revival, for Roundabout, of Samm-Art Williams's **"Home,"** from 1979, in which a North Carolina farmer goes on a northern odyssey, only to discover the appeal of his own front porch (Todd Haimes Theatre; May 17), and **"Oh, Mary!"** shoots its shot uptown, moving Cole Escola's camp farce about First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln to the Lyceum (June 26). Meanwhile, at PAC NYC, the directors Zhailon Levingston and Bill Rauch take on the Andrew Lloyd Webber meowsterpiece "Cats," reënvisioning it as **"Cats: 'The Jellicle Ball' "** (June 13-July 14), a ballroom-voguing competition, complete with dancers, plus André De Shields as Old Deuteronomy, strutting down a catwalk. (You see what they did there.)

The Public Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park is paused this year—the Delacorte is still being renovated—but the Public's Mobile Unit tours the five boroughs with a bilingual adaptation of **"The Comedy of Errors"** (May 28-June 30), and the Classical Theatre of Harlem's **"A Midsummer Night's Dream"** (July 6-28) glitters in Marcus Garvey Park, so there's plenty of Bardic fairy dust to go around. And, if you're still yearning for summer classics, you can always . . . leave. The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, in Garrison, N.Y., presents a repertory season (June 11-Sept. 2), which includes Whitney White's disco-infused adaptation of Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses plays, called **"By the Queen"**; at Bard SummerScape, the puckish transgressives of Elevator Repair Service attempt James Joyce's behemoth **"Ulysses"** (June 20-July 14); Kate Scelsa and Robert M. Johanson première their new opera-theatre work, **"Hilma,"** based on the mystical painter Hilma af Klint, at the Wilma, in Philadelphia (June 4-23); and Florence Welch and Martyna Majok have the green light for another of this year's adaptations of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, **"Gatsby,"** at the American Repertory Theatre, in Cambridge (May 23). Why not drive up to see it? You know it's what Daisy would do.

—Helen Shaw

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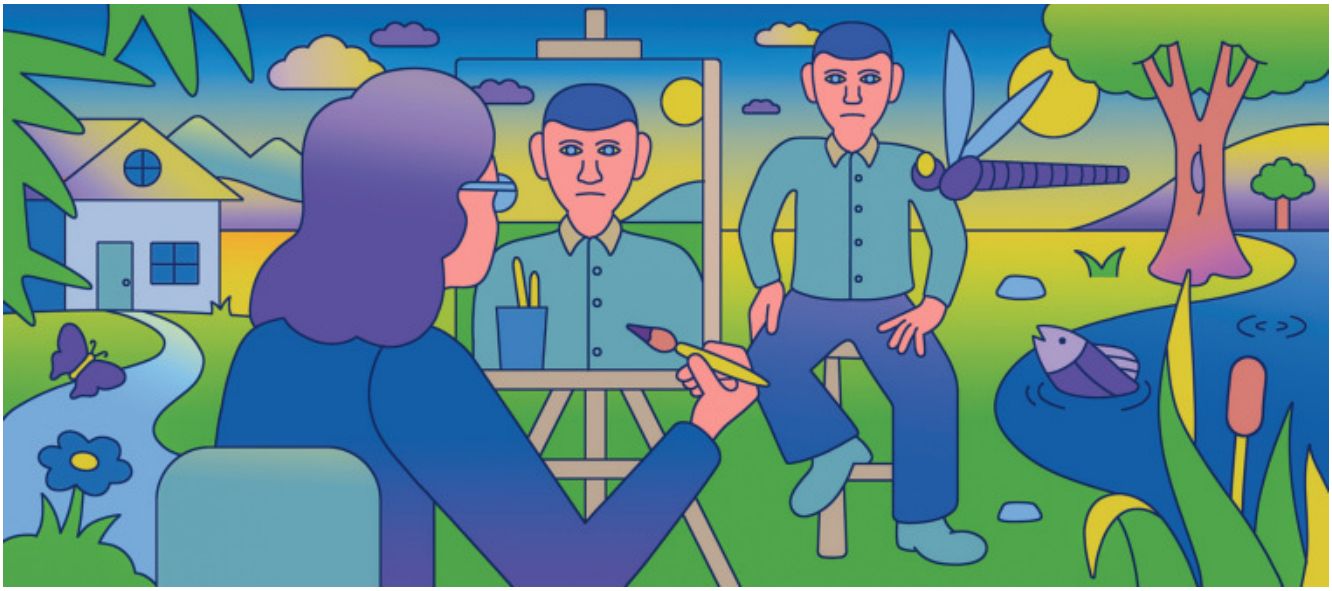

ART

Sizzling Color, Paula Modersohn-Becker, a Gilded Age Master

Though far from the most renowned today, the Jewish Museum may have been the single most important art institution in New York during the nineteen-sixties, arguably the single most important decade in New York art history; had it never existed, the careers of umpteen major sculptors and painters wouldn't have been the same. **"Overflow, Afterglow: New Work in Chromatic Figuration"** (opening May 23) gathers paintings, sculptures, and installations by seven artists, most of them under forty, and continues the museum's honorable tradition of making worthy, unfamiliar names more familiar. "Chromatic" is putting it mildly—the colors pop and sizzle, and anyone who visits in the hopes of escaping the summer temperatures will find a different kind of heat waiting inside.

If the Jewish Museum leaves you thirsty for more lush brightness, the Brazilian multidisciplinary artist Tadáskía brings enough for everybody with the MOMA exhibition **"Projects: Tadáskía,"** presented in collaboration with the Studio Museum in Harlem (May 24). The centerpiece, holding court in the museum's street-level galleries all summer, is a sixty-one-part free-form drawing, titled "ave preta mística mystical black bird," which relays a tale of mythic, triumphant journeying—a fitting theme for the artist's first solo show in the U.S.

A second artist getting her first major museum show in the U.S. is the German Expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, who died in 1907, at the age of thirty-one. Though perhaps best known for her correspondences with her friend Rainer Maria Rilke, she produced more than seven hundred paintings, the most astonishing of which are her nude self-portraits, often thought to be the first created by a female artist. That some of these images depict her pregnant adds a melancholy subtext she couldn't have intended: it was a postpartum embolism that ended her life. A year earlier, she told Rilke, "I am Me, and hope to become that more and more," a mini-manifesto that inspired the name of the exhibition **"Paula Modersohn-Becker: Ich Bin Ich"** (June 6), at the Neue Galerie.

Is it possible for a creative figure whose works are beloved and synonymous with the superlative to be underappreciated? With **"Collecting Inspiration: Edward C. Moore at Tiffany & Co."** (June 9), the Met fêtes a Gilded Age master who helped make the world's most famous jewelry firm what it remains today. More than a hundred and eighty pieces from Moore's personal collection, ranging from Japanese lacquerware to Venetian glass, along with seventy pieces from Tiffany, where he served as chief designer for more than two decades, present a thorough case for Moore as an essential craftsman and a great artist.

Later that month, a different collector by the name of Moore assists the Morgan Library & Museum with its centennial celebrations. **"Far and Away: Drawings from the Clement C. Moore Collection"** (June 28) comprises around seventy-five works by Rembrandt, Peter Lely, Hendrick Goltzius, and others—great news if you care about art and even better news if you love the Dutch Old Masters. Moore was named after his ancestor, the author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas"; this summer, at the Morgan, Christmas comes early.

If Christmas in summer isn't climate confusion enough, pay a visit to the eighth floor of the Whitney Museum, where, on June 29, the 1972 installation **"Survival Piece #5: Portable Orchard,"** created by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, makes its museum début. Eighteen live trees occupy the space, their peacefulness a reproof to the growing emergency beyond them. Sometimes the past makes us think, Now we know better, and other times—hot on the heels of what was probably the hottest spring on record, for instance—it makes us realize that we haven't learned much at all.

—Jackson Arn

DANCE

"Summer for the City," a Virginia Woolf Ballet

In summer, if you're lucky, dance can include fresh air, beautiful views, even fireflies. For the third year in a row, Lincoln Center will be transformed into an outdoor urban playground, complete with a giant disco ball, as part of **"Summer for the City"** (June 12-Aug. 10). Classes, silent-disco dancing (with music provided via headphones), and themed dance parties, from swing to mambo, animate the center's grounds—as do more formal performances. During **"India Week"** (July 10-14), the British dancer-choreographer **Aakash Odedra**—trained in kathak and bharata natyam—and the Chinese dancer-choreographer **Hu Shenyuan** bring their collaboration, "Samsara" (July 11-12), to the Rose Theatre at Jazz at Lincoln Center. In this tale of discovery, based on a sixteenth-century Chinese novel recounting the travels of a Buddhist monk, Odedra's lithe, quick-footed dancing meets Hu's liquid, shape-shifting style.

Steps away, at the Metropolitan Opera House, **American Ballet Theatre** rolls out a series of big evening-length ballets (June 18-July 20). The rhapsodic (such as John Cranko's "Onegin," based on Pushkin and set to music by Tchaikovsky, though not from the eponymous opera) alternates with the cinematic (Christopher Wheeldon's "Like Water for Chocolate") and the technologically dazzling. The latter is best exemplified by the company première of **"Woolf Works,"** Wayne McGregor's 2015 précis of Virginia Woolf's life and œuvre. In this ballet, Woolf's lyrical, poetic prose is translated into visual and aural theatre through the use of roiling projections, lasers, and an enveloping score by Max Richter, counterparts to McGregor's slippery-sinuous choreography. Alessandra Ferri, for whom the central role—a stand-in for Woolf—was created, returns for two performances (June 25 and June 28).

From June 26 to August 25, the bucolic grounds of **Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival,** an oasis of dance nestled in the Berkshires, come alive. London's **Royal Ballet** (July 3-7) pays its first visit, with a smorgasbord of excerpts and short works that includes a section from Pam Tanowitz's recent piece "Secret Things," a witty deconstruction of ballet training and technique, along with Frederick Ashton's "Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan," an evocation of Duncan's liberated, ecstatic explorations of music. The Russian megastar Natalia Osipova, based in London for the past decade, makes an appearance on July 3, in the Ashton ballet. On July 12, an evening called **"Three Duets"** is devoted to duets both by and inspired by Merce Cunningham. Cunningham's experiments in partnering—through which he created a dispassionate autonomy for each of the dancers—expanded the possibilities of the form. Alongside his "Landrover," the dancers will perform Liz Gerring's lively, athletic "Dialogue" and Kyle Abraham's more intimate "MotorRover."

The **Paul Taylor Dance Company,** which is contemplating a major move into an expansive new space in midtown, brings two programs of chamber dances to the Joyce (June 25-30). The works point to Taylor's range, from the savagery of "Big Bertha"—a shocking depiction of sexual abuse in a seemingly "normal" family—to the innocent lyricism of "Airs."

Additional open-air performances take place at parks all over the city, including but not limited to Little Island (the première of **Twyla Tharp's** "How Long Blues," June 1-23; **Pam Tanowitz's** "Day for Night," July 17-21), Bryant Park (its **Picnic Performances** feature "Torch," from **Ronald K. Brown/Evidence,** on June 14, and "Gloria," from **Mark Morris Dance Group,** on Aug. 31), Prospect Park (a mixed program by **Ronald K. Brown/Evidence,** in the **BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn!** festival, on July 26), and Rockefeller Park, which hosts the **Battery Dance Festival,** Aug. 11-17.

—Marina Harss

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CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Modern R. & B., Rap Agitators, Gen X Royalty

This summer of music concerts is marked by virtuosos and tinkerers, flourishing songwriters and nostalgia-laden bands, outdoor jazz and insider pop. The spellbinding harpist **Brandee Younger** returns to the Blue Note (June 10), and the Tuareg musician **Mdou Moctar** brings the intensified guitar playing of his fiery LP "Funeral for Justice" to Warsaw (June 26). As **Nourished by Time,** Marcus Brown blends club music and R. & B. into an aberrant pop, and he unleashes the unsteady voice at its center on Bowery Ballroom (June 11). On Aug. 23, at Terminal 5, **Santigold** pursues the merger of indie and electronic sounds that she began with her self-titled début, in 2008.

At Radio City Music Hall, the ascending Philly balladeer **Lizzy McAlpine** shares raw, intimate songs about coming of age (June 18-19). The late-blooming country troubadour **Charley Crockett** blows into Brooklyn Paramount to spin yarns from his searching new album, "$10 Cowboy" (July 20). Jessica Pratt, among the most bewitching folk singer-songwriters of the moment, stages her insular music at Bowery Ballroom (July 24). On June 16, **Corinne Bailey Rae,** a sunny-soul songbird in transition, kicks off a packed schedule for SummerStage, which teams up with the Blue Note Jazz Festival for performances at Central Park and other parks around the city—see the drummer **Yussef Dayes** (June 22) and the Mercury Prize-winning quintet **Ezra Collective** (July 7). Beyond the jazz fest, smooth sounds at SummerStage abound from **Masego** and **Jordan Ward** (June 19), the minimalist soloist **Arooj Aftab** (July 24), and the pianist **Robert Glasper** together with the neo-jazz singer **YEBBA** (Aug. 1).

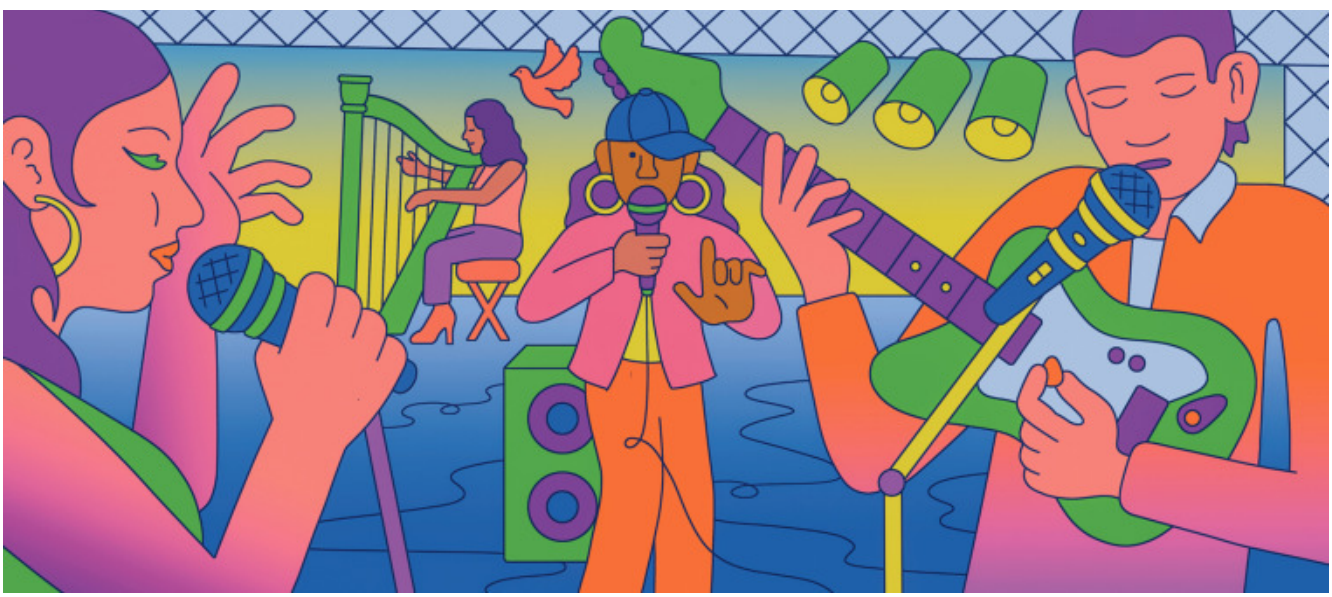
The amplitude of modern R. & B. is on full display this season. At the Barclays Center stop on her tour "The Magic Hour," the soother **Jhené Aiko** unites with the like-minded artists Tink, Kiana Ledé, and UMI (July 1). The syrup-voiced **Lucky Daye** offers music of stimulation at Radio City Music Hall (Aug. 7), building on R. & B. of the past with subtle instrumental frills. At Brooklyn Paramount, **SiR** and **Zacari,** scions of the TDE label (July 29), and the Drake-sponsored playboy **PARTYNEXTDOOR** (Aug. 8-9) put forth medleys inspired by their rap adjacency.

Additionally, some rap agitators take the summer to put everyone on notice. **ScHoolboy Q,** a dynamo reimagining gangsta-rap brutishness, mines the energy of his bounce-back LP, "Blue Lips" (Brooklyn Paramount; July 27). The Blue Note continues a hip-hop run with **Killer Mike,** who swept the rap categories at this year's Grammys (July 29-31). In another late-career success for a rap veteran, the multimedia trailblazer **Missy Elliott** embarks on her first-ever headlining tour, joined by old friends—Busta Rhymes, Ciara, and Timbaland—at Barclays Center (Aug. 12).

Other stadiums and arenas host rock from multiple eras. **The Pixies** and **Modest Mouse** bridge two generations of alternative and indie music, co-headlining a show at Forest Hills Stadium (June 15). At Citi Field, after two nights of the **Foo Fighters** with special guests (July 17 and July 19), skate punk descends, with **Blink-182** (July 21) and **Green Day** (Aug. 5). At Madison Square Garden, as the members of **Glass Animals** look to build out their sound, they extend the stage to the genre-bursting Brockhampton leader **Kevin Abstract** (Aug. 13).

Contemporary pop artists can be found elsewhere, breaking with convention and showing off new music. The former Kanye West protégée **Kacy Hill** works through her first album since 2021, "Bug" (Music Hall of Williamsburg; May 30). On "Funk Generation," the Brazilian titan **Anitta** emerges atop the baile-funk wave (Brooklyn Paramount; June 2-3). The summer reaches a fever pitch, on June 11, at Knockdown Center, when **Charli XCX** débuts "Brat," a club record calling back to the London rave scene of her youth.

—*Sheldon Pearce*



MOVIES

Furiosa's Origin, Apollo 11, Costner's Wild West

The concept of summer movies is synonymous with action, and also with action franchises, as with **"Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga"** (May 24), George Miller's prequel to "Mad Max: Fury Road." Anya Taylor-Joy plays the title character as a young woman, who is kidnapped from the matriarchy in which she's been raised and must fight her biker-gang captors in order to return home; Chris Hemsworth plays Furiosa's nemesis, the warlord Dementus. **"A Quiet Place: Day One"** (June 28), the third installment in the series, is also a prequel, directed by Michael Sarnoski and starring Lupita Nyong'o, Djimon Hounsou, Alex Wolff, and Joseph Quinn in an origin story about an alien invasion's first contact with Earth, in New York City. **"Twisters"** (July 19), the sequel to the 1996 hit "Twister," stars Daisy Edgar-Jones, Glen Powell, and Anthony Ramos as some of the storm chasers risking life and limb to track tornadoes, which have grown more prevalent owing to climate change. Lee Isaac Chung ("Minari") directed.

Upcoming historical dramas, whether factual or counterfactual, are headed by **"Kidnapped"** (May 24), in which the Italian director Marco Bellocchio tells the real-life story of Edgardo Mortara, a Jewish boy living in Bologna in the eighteen-fifties, who, having been secretly baptized by his family's maid, was therefore legally considered Catholic and, as a result, was taken from his parents and placed in a Catholic school. **"Fly Me to the Moon"** (July 12), set amid the run-up to the launch of Apollo 11, in 1969, involves an advertising executive (Scarlett Johansson) and a NASA engineer (Channing Tatum) who are ordered to work together to create a fake moon landing in case the real one fails. Greg Berlanti directed. In Kevin Costner's largely self-financed passion project, **"Horizon: An American Saga,"** the first two "chapters" (of a planned four) trace the westward expansion of the United States amid the Civil War (June 28 and Aug. 16). Costner, who directed and co-wrote the script, also stars, alongside a cast that includes Sam Worthington, Sienna Miller, Tatanka Means, and Giovanni Ribisi.

Crime continues to pay for notable directors, as in Richard Linklater's wry drama **"Hit Man"** (May 24), based on a true story, starring Glen Powell (who co-wrote the script) as an undercover police officer who, during a sting operation, falls in love with a suspect (Adria Arjona). Jeff Nichols's **"The Bikeriders"** (June 21), inspired by a 1968 photo book by Danny Lyon, focusses on a group of motorcyclists in Chicago whose activities cross over into violence. Jodie Comer, Tom Hardy, and Austin Butler are bikers; Mike Faist portrays Lyon. In Josh Margolin's comedy **"Thelma"** (June 21), June Squibb plays a nonagenarian who, after falling victim to a phone scam that costs her thousands of dollars, takes vigilante action; the late Richard Roundtree, in his last movie role, plays her partner.

Family stories come in many forms in the season's offerings. The playwright Annie Baker's first feature, **"Janet Planet"** (June 21), set in her home state of Massachusetts in 1991, stars Julianne Nicholson as a single mother who's trying to work out her love life while coping with the needs of her eleven-year-old daughter (Zoe Ziegler) during summer vacation. Lily Gladstone stars in Erica Tremblay's début fiction feature, **"Fancy Dance"** (June 21), as a Seneca-Cayuga woman undertaking a dangerous search for her sister, who has gone missing; she brings her niece (Isabel DeRoy-Olson) on the journey. The latest mystery from M. Night Shyamalan, **"Trap"** (Aug. 9), is centered on a serial killer (Josh Hartnett) who is being hunted by police officers while attending a concert with his daughter (Ariel Donoghue).

—Richard Brody

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE PAGES OF WAR

Seven months after October 7th, it is still October 8th, the day after, in the State of Israel. The country remains in mourning, a depressed state of being that alternates among rage at Israel's enemies; rage at its leaders; anxiety about the hostages in Gaza; excruciating doubt about the future of the country; and bewilderment that so much of the world has turned its attention to the horrific, ever-growing number of dead and wounded Palestinians. Insofar as Israeli television covers Gaza at all, it is usually through the lens of military strategy, the loss of Israeli soldiers, and the fate of the hostages. As was the case for so long in the United States after 9/11, empathy often turns out to be a limited, and predominantly domestic, resource. The main outliers in this emotional landscape are the two million Palestinian citizens of Israel, men and women who exist with a kind of double consciousness, at once living alongside their Jewish neighbors and getting catastrophic news on their phones from Gaza, sometimes about the loss of relatives and friends.

Israeli public opinion is hardly a monolith. There are frequent demonstrations against the right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu. The press can also prove diverse and aggressive. On the investigative TV news program "Uvda," on Channel 12, the host, Ilana Dayan, interviewed a former chief of the Shin Bet intelligence agency, Nadav Argaman, who flatly accused Netanyahu's government of "deliberately destroying Israeli society in order to remain in power." Such material would not likely be permitted in an authoritarian regime, and yet Netanyahu's Cabinet, which certainly includes authoritarians, recently voted to shut down Al Jazeera's operations in Israel, branding the network's coverage a threat to national security.

It's essential to emphasize the heroic work that has been done by Palestinian journalists in Gaza, many of whom have been killed. But it is also worth looking at one of the few Hebrew-language institutions that consistently attempt to wrestle, however imperfectly, with the realities of what is going on in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank: the newspaper *Haaretz*, which was founded in 1918. In terms of audience, *Haaretz* trails far behind the popular tabloid *Yedioth Ahronoth* and the conservative paper *Israel Hayom*, which is owned by the family of the late billionaire casino operator Sheldon Adelson. *Haaretz's* resources are modest, its reputation primarily ideological; it is left wing in a country that has moved decidedly to the right.

Yet what's been impressive about the paper lately is the breadth of its reporting and analysis. On a nearly daily basis, Amos Harel and Anshel Pfeffer give unblinkered assessments of brutal military overreach and political folly; Yaniv Kubovich has scored one scoop after another on the failures of the security establishment. Amira Hass, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, has been living in, and reporting from, Gaza and the West Bank for more than three decades. Her anatomization of the structures and the human costs of occupation has been an insistent, if willfully ignored, presence in Israeli public life for more than a generation. Netta Ahituv's portrait of David Hasan, a Palestinian American neurosurgeon at Duke, who has been treating children and adults in Gaza, provided a glimpse of the suffering in Khan Younis and Rafah. Hasan recalled trying to attend to his countless patients while bombs shook the hospital to its foundation. "I asked the local doctors what to do," he said, "and they told me . . . I should just keep working to distract myself from the anxiety." Sheren Falah Saab, who grew up in the western Galilee and covers Arab culture for the paper, recently published a stark report on Gaza in which she allowed the victims to speak directly to the reader:

> "Death is everywhere. Not all the dead can be buried, not all the bodies can be extricated." That's how Maha, a 36-year-old mother of three who fled Gaza City for Rafah, describes the situation in the Strip. "Sometimes, when they can't find and remove all the bodies that were buried

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

during a shelling, they ask the neighbors or relatives and write the names of the dead on the wall of the house, if there's still a wall. They write that they're there, under the ruins. Maybe at some point they'll be able to extricate them."

No less impressive is the paper's overall capacity to present multiple truths to readers who might prefer to avoid them. *Haaretz* has reported, for example, on the deeply troubling rise in antisemitism around the world, but, unlike some other outlets, it has generally avoided comparing the situation to 1938 or tarring most student demonstrators as "pro-Hamas."

The reporting on Netanyahu has been both factual and critical, but *Haaretz* has also presented a three-dimensional picture of the world in which the Israeli Prime Minister is not the only dangerous actor in the regional drama. Not long ago, Shlomi Eldar interviewed a range of Palestinians—including many Fatah supporters—who had experienced life in Gaza under Hamas rule and then left for Cairo. A former Fatah official named Sufyan Abu Zaydeh told Eldar how, on October 7th, when he saw a jeep racing by carrying an Israeli hostage, he anticipated with despair the war to come: "Gaza was on the road to perdition." And Eldar's Palestinian sources described in detail a meeting nearly three years ago at the seaside Commodore Hotel, in Gaza, called "The Promise of the Hereafter Conference." At that meeting, Eldar's sources told him, delegates discussed their plans to conquer Israel—or, as the Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar put it in a statement, to bring about the "full liberation of Palestine from the sea to the river." Hamas leaders outlined various aspects of what should follow—which Israelis ought to be killed or prosecuted, how to avoid a "brain drain," and how to divvy up Israeli properties, including apartments, schools, gas stations, and power plants.

Netanyahu's government has expressed its admiration for *Haaretz* by having its communications minister, Shlomo Karhi, lash out at the paper's "defeatist and false propaganda." One of the Cabinet's most reactionary ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has referred to *Haaretz* as "the Hamas daily."

With Netanyahu currently threatening a full-blown assault on Rafah, it's nearly impossible to think of the future in any clear way. Amid all the fury and death and distrust, what is needed are leaders, thinkers, and institutions of vision and integrity to build what has always been imperative: a set of political arrangements that refuse to accept the cruelly stubborn "facts on the ground" of occupation, and a concerted movement toward a humane and workable settlement that provides the Israelis with the security that they naturally require and the Palestinians with the dignity and the independence that they rightly demand.

—David Remnick

AT THE MUSEUM DEPT.
THE RULER'S BACK

In early May, by the entrance of a gallery in the gem-and-mineral halls at the American Museum of Natural History, Ricky Walters, the hip-hop icon known as Slick Rick, stood by a photograph of himself in the new show "Ice Cold: An Exhibition of Hip-Hop Jewelry," for which he served as senior curatorial adviser. Walters is fifty-nine and trim, with a shaved head. He wore an elegant black suit and a suède eye patch; diamonds adorned his wedding ring, ear stud, wristwatch, and teeth. "Jewelry adds to your mojo, your finesse, the Monet," he said. ("I call everything Monet—I like his style of painting. Everything you see got to be beautiful, bring pleasantry, add something to your eyesight.") "If I'm like this"—he gestured at his outfit—"I'm cool. But, if you throw the jewelry on, it gives a little oomph, a little pop." In the exhibition photo, taken after the release of his 1988 solo début, "The Great Adventures of Slick Rick," he wears several gold chains of seafaring heft, eight doubloon-size diamond rings, and an enormous jewelled crown. Looking at his image, Walters admired one chain, a Cuban-link style ("Rakim had one, too"), and said he'd like another. "But bigger—much, much bigger—to make an impression today."

Walters, who rose to fame in 1985 with Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew ("La Di Da Di," "The Show") and became one of hip-hop's most sampled artists, spent his adolescence in the Bronx, after moving there from southwest London. The royalty motif "came from an English upbringing," he said. The monarchy, sure, but also "Walt Disney, Cinderella stories, the castle, the Snow Whites, love stories, the Sleeping Beauties, the prince comes with the slipper, Robin Hood, the jesters. It's all the same." He'd open shows in a king's robe, trying to look as though he were "in a castle, sitting on a throne," and rapped in tones of smoothly languid amusement, calling himself Rick the Ruler. "I used to say, 'Hark! Who goes yonder?' 'It is I, sire! Richard of Nottingham!'" He recited the rest of his intro to "The Ruler's Back," concluding, " 'Rick the Ruler has returned!'" He went on, "So that, embedded with the African American culture. You've got to have fun, you know?"

"Ice Cold," curated by Vikki Tobak, the author of a 2022 book of that title, surveys the evolution of jewelry in hip-hop. More than forty artists, including Walters, loaned pieces. Taking in the first items, Walters said, "We come from the era of Mr. T"—multiple "small" gold chains—"and took it to the next level: one big chain." He examined a spotlighted Run-DMC rope chain with a gold Adidas-sneaker pendant the size of a Twinkie. "They made rope chains famous," he said. "This was Jam Master Jay's." Beneath one of Flavor Flav's

Slick Rick

more modest clocks ("That's from their first album") was a Biz Markie pendant. "Biz Markie had a really nice ring, pretty advanced for the time," Walters said—a cursive "BIZ," in diamonds, nearly the size of his hand. This was the first hip-hop commission for Jacob Arabo, the legendary Jacob the Jeweler; soon, creative medallions flourished. "I got my biggest plates from Canal Street," Walters said. One, with a Libra design, mesmerized him for two years. "It must have been a drug dealer's plate he couldn't come back and get. I'm not even a Libra, but I had to have it." As "the money began to flow," over the years, "the jewelry game changed—it went to ice, diamonds. It evolved, it grew, so I had to grow with it."

The gallery, tucked within a hall full of geodes, meteorites, and such, is dimly lit, for optimal gemological appreciation. "That's Ghostface's bracelet," Walters said: a falconer-size gold arm cuff, with eagle. "Astonishing." They'd once encountered each other, decked out in big plates—his Libra, and Ghostface's "huge Versace plate, a bit bigger than mine, and it was *iced*. I was, like, 'Jesus, Ghost!' He's slick, right? There's no going back. You gotta go forward." A "Q.B." pendant, for Queensbridge Houses, where Nas grew up: "This was Nas's chain when he first was doing his thing." (An Amy Winehouse lyric, in a song about Nas: "What kind of fuckery is this? / You made me miss the Slick Rick gig.") In "Hypnotize" (which riffs on "La Di Da Di"), Biggie Smalls raps about his "Jesus piece"; its artist's proof was displayed nearby, featuring a startled-looking bejewelled Jesus. "Yeah, that's Jesus," Walters said. "This would work once upon a time, but today it would be too small. No disrespect to the history, you know?" He passed a humble display of leather-patch pendants from De La Soul and Public Enemy, and stopped to marvel at Tyler, the Creator's "bellhop" necklace: a five-inch-tall diamond-and-sapphire figurine carrying suitcases.

Walters beheld the show's centerpiece: a Slick Rick-dominated vitrine featuring a diamond-covered eye patch and a diamond-esque crown, floating ghostlike in midair. The eye patch is forty-two carats. "The crown isn't real," Walters said. He smiled. "My wife threw it in there for Monet."

—*Sarah Larson*

THE PICTURES
TENNIS GUY

Brad Gilbert likes tennis so much that he has trouble sleeping. "I get up at three," Gilbert said the other day, at the Malibu Racquet Club, outside L.A., while some middle-aged hackers played doubles. "I love waking up, thinking of all the details. My entire adult life, I'm just a tennis guy. I've never had a moment where I don't like doing and being a part of the tennis."

Life, so far, in the tennis: player (top five), author ("Winning Ugly"), commentator (ESPN), actor (" 'Red Oaks' on Amazon. I was Dr. Feinberg—the club champion!"), real coach to real players (Agassi, Roddick, Murray, Coco Gauff), and, recently, real coach to fake players (Zendaya, Josh O'Connor, and Mike Faist, for "Challengers").

"I did Z before I started coaching Coco," he said. Zendaya rooted for Coco from afar as she won last year's U.S. Open, but they've yet to meet. "Coco said she sent her the biggest bouquet of flowers that she'd ever gotten in her life. Z came to the finals of Indian Wells, but Coco lost in the semis. She was so gutted."

Gilbert, who is sixty-two, was wearing a bucket hat atop a bald head, with a neck gaiter and Nike sweats. His phone buzzed with texts from Gauff's agent. He'd planned to be with her for the Madrid Open, but he'd been waylaid by dental work.

Gilbert got the movie gig through his daughter, Julian—a reverse nepo-baby situation. Julian was working for the producer Amy Pascal, who had the "Challengers" script. "She happened to tell Amy, 'My dad's, like, the tennis guy,'" he said.

Movie coaching wasn't like professional coaching. "At first, they would practice with just the butt end, no head, and no ball," Gilbert said. But he used the same incentive strategy he does with the pros. "I always had Jolly Ranchers," he said. "When I'd give them to Coco, she'd be, like, 'Stop!' But then, after she won the Open, she got me probably ten thousand Ranchers. The biggest fuckin' box you have ever seen. And a bunch of flavors that I'd never even seen before. I have a couple of flavors that are bad luck, peach and raspberry." Why? "It's just bad luck." He added, "My grandfather drove a cab in San Francisco for fifty years, and he always had Jolly Ranchers in his cab. Literally, my entire career, I always had a Jolly Rancher in my mouth. Sometimes I do on ESPN. They get pissed. 'B.G., spit out the fuckin' Rancher!' Bad habit. That's why my teeth are fucked up."

Gilbert's wife, Kim, also consulted on the film. She sent the actors tennis tape to study. O'Connor's character was modelled on a poor man's Nick Kyrgios,

Brad Gilbert

and Zendaya's on tall bruisers like Maria Sharapova, Venus Williams, and Aryna Sabalenka. Faist's character was an elegant player. "Like a Fed or Sampras, with a one-handed backhand," Gilbert said. "Mike was a high-school player with a two-handed backhand. He was so pissed, like, 'Fuck, I don't wanna hit this one-handed backhand!' I was, like, 'Dude, I didn't write it!' " The three worked together, with Gilbert, every day, for six weeks straight. "The last day of our practicing routine, Z got a pin made with me on it, with hair, from, like, the nineties," Gilbert said. "She gave it to everybody. It kind of choked me up."

Gilbert had some experience coaching famous non-players. He trained Robin Williams for a charity doubles match with Andre Agassi against Pete

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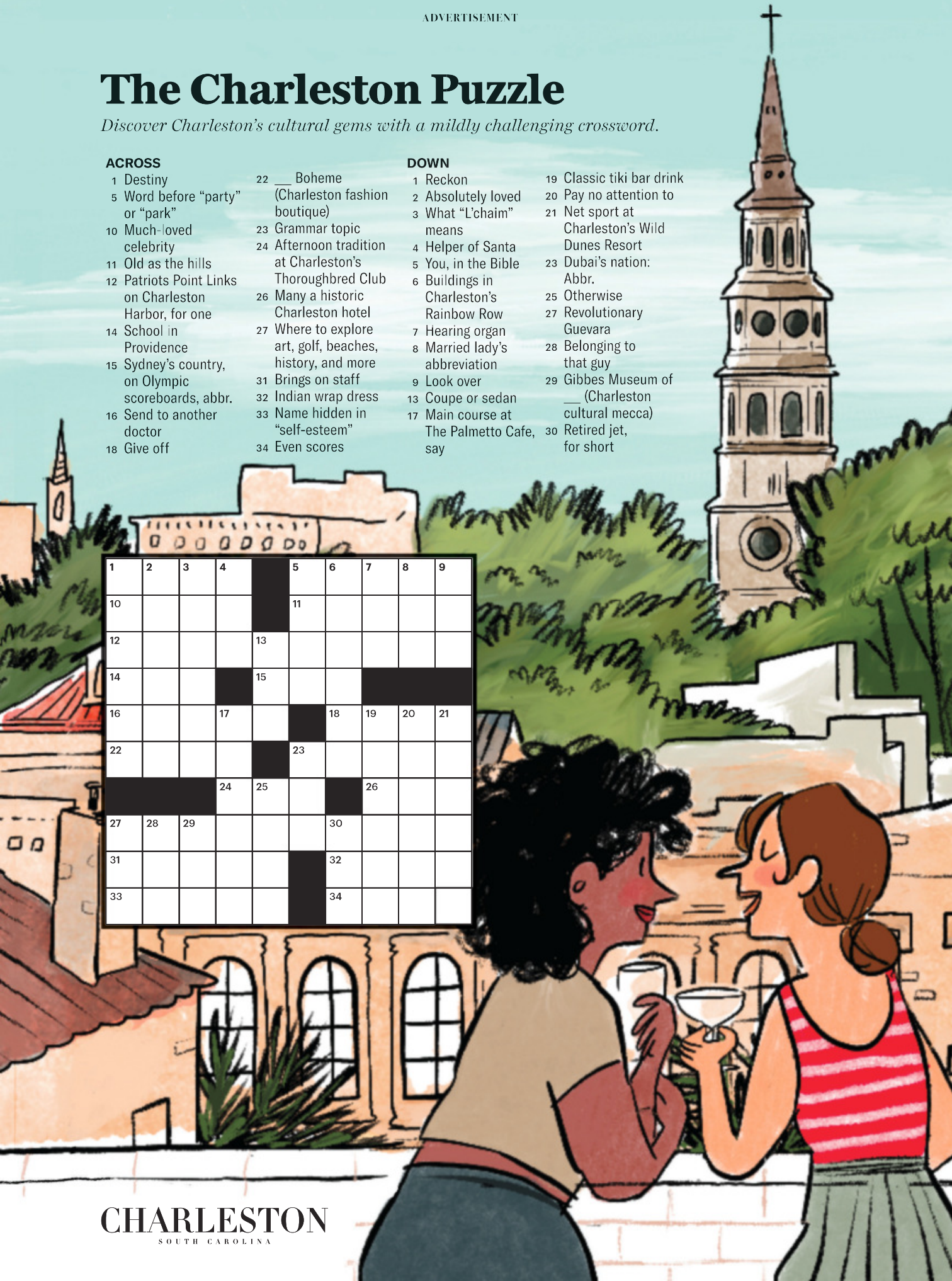
5 Word before "party" or "park"
10 Much-loved celebrity
11 Old as the hills
12 Patriots Point Links on Charleston Harbor, for one
14 School in Providence
15 Sydney's country, on Olympic scoreboards, abbr.
16 Send to another doctor
18 Give off
22 ___ Boheme (Charleston fashion boutique)
23 Grammar topic
24 Afternoon tradition at Charleston's Thoroughbred Club
26 Many a historic Charleston hotel
27 Where to explore art, golf, beaches, history, and more
31 Brings on staff
32 Indian wrap dress
33 Name hidden in "self-esteem"
34 Even scores

DOWN

1 Reckon
2 Absolutely loved
3 What "L'chaim" means
4 Helper of Santa
5 You, in the Bible
6 Buildings in Charleston's Rainbow Row
7 Hearing organ
8 Married lady's abbreviation
9 Look over
13 Coupe or sedan
17 Main course at The Palmetto Cafe, say
19 Classic tiki bar drink
20 Pay no attention to
21 Net sport at Charleston's Wild Dunes Resort
23 Dubai's nation: Abbr.
25 Otherwise
27 Revolutionary Guevara
28 Belonging to that guy
29 Gibbes Museum of ___ (Charleston cultural mecca)
30 Retired jet, for short



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Sampras and Billy Crystal. "Billy was giving him shit that he was taking the tennis seriously," Gilbert said. A friend of Gilbert's, the basketball player Chris Mullin, once showed up at his house with Michael Jordan. "They knocked on the door, and it was, like, 'Oh, shit!'" Gilbert said. It was Jordan's first time playing tennis; he tried to wager on it.

Gilbert grabbed a ball and practiced some serve tosses. Luca Guadagnino, the director, had Gilbert choreograph all the tennis points for the movie. Gilbert also lined up a former player for a bit part as Faist's coach in the film, Karl, but the guy cancelled at the last minute. "The A2"—the second assistant director—"he was, like, 'B.G., you're gonna be fucking Karl,'" he recalled. "Next thing you know, they put the wig on me, put the mustache on me, put these clothes on—there's Coach Karl." He appears for a few seconds, yelling, in a heavy German accent, "More *aggressif!*"

Gilbert's phone buzzed again. It was Gauff's dad, letting him know that the team had found Gilbert a 7 A.M. flight to Nice the next day. It was going to be a busy three months—Italian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, coaching and commentating. But he'd find time to play. "I go hit on the wall at least two, three days a week at 6 A.M.," he said. "I hate coming back and missing balls. Let's say I'm not gonna play—if I'm in my room, I just swing my racket. Then you don't get blisters."

—Zach Helfand

FOMO DEPT.
GETTING IN

For those who suffer from FOMO, the fear of missing out, this can be a mean season in Manhattan, with red-carpet events sucking all the air out of the social calendar. But Fred Karger, a seventy-four-year-old former political consultant, finds high season to be an enjoyable challenge. The other night, Karger, who has made party crashing his retirement avocation, stood at a stanchion surveying guests checking into the celebrity-clogged *Time* 100 Gala, at 10 Columbus Circle.

"I think there's a way in on the fourth floor, just through a side door and curtain," he whispered. As part of his battle plan, he had scoped the place out the day before, sneaking into a pre-gala meeting after stealing an access badge from a media war room, and photographing a production schedule to get the lay of the land. He then Googled the guest list to see if anyone resembled him enough for him to impersonate them at check-in. Kamala Harris was expected. "Which means added security, with the Secret Service," he said—along with the possibility of going to jail.

It was only six-thirty, and Karger, in a crisp black Theory suit, looked undaunted as guests streamed by. Onlookers cheered when Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively walked the nearby red carpet. "I used her to get into another party," Karger said. That was Donatella Versace's 2018 Met Gala after-party, at the Mark Hotel. "I'd been turned away, so I grabbed the train to Blake's gown and got in."

By then, he'd already crashed the 2017 Met Gala and *Vanity Fair's* 2006 Academy Awards party. For that one, he'd toted a fake Oscar, giving the check-in people the name of a visual-effects award winner whom he resembled. When he dropped his statuette on the floor while taking a selfie with Catherine Keener, the Los Angeles *Times* included the incident in its coverage. Jake Gyllenhaal was suspicious. "That's not real, is it?" he asked. Karger had had an easier time when he crashed the Oscars as a college student, in the early seventies. To secure an invitation in 1972, he had typed a letter on pilfered NBC stationery saying that he and a buddy were the nephews of the president of RCA. They ended up on the stage at the end of the night with a group of stars applauding Charlie Chaplin, who'd won a lifetime-achievement award. The next year, Karger appeared onstage again, with a crowd of winners that included Liza Minnelli.

"I guess you could say I was filling in for Marlon Brando, who had won best actor for The Godfather that year," Karger wrote in a memoir that he recently self-published, called "World's Greatest Crasher."

Karger, who splits his time between Manhattan and Laguna Beach, California, was also the first openly gay candidate for President. (He ran in 2012 as a Republican but has since switched parties.) Although he is from a prominent Chicago family, he doesn't let his dignity get in the way of his hobby. As a teenager, he crashed a gala by pretending to be a busboy, shocking his parents, who were guests. Years later, a concerned friend noticed him tending bar at a fund-raiser for the Elton John AIDS Foundation and asked if he was doing all right. "I just told him I was volunteering," Karger said. He has crashing rules, including the "three 'hey' rule"—ignore yelling guards for as long as possible after sneaking in. Another door tip: wait for celebrities to arrive, because they distract gatekeepers

"Don't worry, honey, it's very grown up to make plans with friends and then hope to hell the other person cancels them."

and travel with an entourage. Karger once gained entry by pushing a stranger's wheelchair.

When the *Time* 100 Gala's cocktail hour was going at full tilt, Karger was still in the cold, and running out of options. He had bought tickets to a concert at Jazz at Lincoln Center, which, he knew, used the same elevator bank as the *Time* party. But a guard was blocking access for everyone but waiters, in head-to-toe black, coming from a catering kitchen. Karger took an escalator down to H&M, purchased a black shirt ($29.95), and put it on over his white shirt. He then strode into the kitchen, grabbed a tray, and walked past security into the party. As guests (including Dev Patel, Uma Thurman, Billy Porter, and Maya Rudolph) finished their cocktails, Karger ditched the tray.

He was initially turned away at the door to the dinner and the awards ceremony, but he prevailed moments later by blending into a crowd around Kelly Ripa. Inside, like a freestyling skateboarder, he flew up some stairs, to the top tier of the atrium, past Jenny Holzer, Patrick Mahomes, and E. Jean Carroll. He found an empty seat at a corner table, then sat down to a meal of Bibb lettuce and grilled arctic char. On a big screen, the evening's host, Taraji P. Henson, told the assembled partyers, "We are the most influential people in the world."

—Bob Morris

FAME GAME
KNICKS CHEERING SECTION

At the last Knicks game of the regular season, Cass Sunstein, the well-known legal scholar, found himself in the nosebleed seats of Madison Square Garden, peering at the celebrities sitting courtside. Seth Meyers beamed for the jumbotron, his son jabbing a big foam finger. In the front row, Patrick Wilson leaned forward intently, eyes slit, black T-shirt snug. Tracy Morgan was there, too, as was Edie Falco. Nearby, a woman in an orange peacoat and silver aviators threw up jazz hands for the cameras. "That's my friend—Connie Britton!" Sunstein said, then glanced around, bashfully.

Sunstein, who teaches law, public policy, and behavioral economics at Harvard, had a postgame train to catch and was dressed Acela casual, in a blue suit and Rockports. He sat clutching his suitcase awkwardly on his lap, wheels up. He looked down at Britton: "To say I'm her friend—I'm a little embarrassed about that."

His new book, "How to Become Famous," analyzes the forces that make for extraordinary success—reputational cascades, network effects, power-law distributions. Luck is essential. Early champions help. Posthumous attention works wonders. "You need to be minimally talented," he allowed, but said that talent wasn't enough. "The number of people who have the capacity to be spectacularly successful or famous—and who are amazing—is very high. And they just didn't get a chance." The book reads like a gentle intervention for the sort of reader who would buy it, and a repudiation of the company it is bound to keep at airport bookstores—the self-actualization manuals that identify some quality possessed by the Connies, Seths, Tracys, Edies, and Patricks of the world, in order to prescribe a regimen for success.

Sunstein rolled his eyes. "The idea that there's a set of people who could have been as successful as Seth Meyers and, of them, Seth Meyers is the best—my guess is Seth Meyers would be the first to say no," he said.

In the taxonomy of the Knicks' V.I.P. section, which nurtures a capacious sense of celebrity (regulars include Jerry Seinfeld, Ben Stiller, Spike Lee, Chris Rock, and Chloë Sevigny), people like Sunstein hover in the middle—the talismanic intellectuals that hedge-funders and media executives bring around as plus-ones. He is a brand-name thinker. At the University of Chicago, where he taught for twenty-seven years, he became known for his vast publishing output. He co-authored "Nudge," the first of several big-ideas best-sellers from him, and shared a faculty lounge with Barack Obama. After marrying his second wife, Samantha Power, he began a stint at the White House.

"I've always just wanted to do something, you know, useful and not of low quality," he said, spinning a suitcase wheel. In 2009, he withstood a brutal confirmation process before the Senate, for the prize of running the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. (Power later became the Ambassador to the U.N.) After he moved to D.C., another academic called with some wisdom. "In academic life," Sunstein recalled him saying, "someone comes in my room and asks me to explain an economic problem—a hard one—and I do. And then they say, 'Thank you,' and leave my office. In government, someone asks me to explain a hard economic problem, I do, and they look at me and say, 'You're an asshole.'" But Sunstein thrilled to bureaucracy, and endured its discontents. "If I was involved in something that no one attributed to me, that was great," he said.

As Frank Sinatra's version of "New York, New York" played, Sunstein mused on being a Swiftie. "The success of Taylor Swift is partly an informational cascade"—people listening to things that they know other people are listening to—"and partly a reputational cascade, where people say they love Taylor Swift, because they kind of have to."

He recalled his own plight as a fan. Once, he was invited to a party where John McEnroe, a personal idol, was a guest. "I said, 'So great to meet you. I play a little sport called squash.'" His response, Sunstein said, was " 'We used to look down on squash players.' What a jerk." Another time, at a hotel in Chicago, he approached Muhammad Ali, and found himself describing the circumstances in which, as a nine-year-old, he'd slept through Ali's 1964 championship match. "Of all the stories he heard from fans, this must have been the most boring," Sunstein said.

On the jumbotron, more specimens from the V.I.P. section appeared. There was the actor Anya Taylor-Joy, who had been discovered by an A-list agent while she was walking her dog past Harrods (luck); Luis Guzmán, a favorite of the directors Paul Thomas Anderson and Steven Soderbergh (early champions); the rapper Lola Brooke, who had gone viral on TikTok (informational cascade). "I don't know any of them," Sunstein said. He considered how famous people tolerate all the attention. "You have to have a capacity to be either bemused by what comes or a capacity to find a hidey-hole," he said. "I'm a big fan of the hidey-hole."

—H. C. Wilentz

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE RIGHT TO HUG

Children are fighting to visit their parents in county jails.

BY SARAH STILLMAN

Le'Essa and Addy Hill could see their father only on commercial video calls.

Le'Essa Hill, aged eighteen, works at a Subway sandwich shop near Flint, Michigan. Her younger sister, a fifteen-year-old aspiring zookeeper named Addy, helps run a "mini-farm" inside the family's green clapboard house. When I first met the girls, early this year, Addy was caring for five dogs, four cats, two rabbits, and a lizard named Lily, who ate crickets and kale. Le'Essa and Addy were unlikely candidates to wage an ideological battle against two big private-equity firms, but they were in the midst of one because of a situation involving their father, Adam Hill. For more than a year, while Adam was held in the county jail, awaiting trial, the girls had been prevented from seeing him in person.

"My dad is the kind of guy who can climb a tree even if it doesn't have any branches," Le'Essa told me. "He just wraps his legs around the trunk." Le'Essa's parents separated when she was young, and her dad has struggled with addiction. "He can be really silly and childish, but in a good way," she added. "Like when something goes wrong, he'll make up a funny song about it." Le'Essa, who, like many teen-agers, has experienced mental-health struggles, wished that she had Adam's companionship. "I feel like my perception of other people is often completely wrong, and I get slapped in the face by that reality a lot," she told me. "My dad is the only person who really gets it, and so if I could have deeper conversations with him that would be magical."

Last fall, Le'Essa learned why the children of Flint had been blocked from seeing their parents at the Genesee County Jail. In 2012, a company called Securus Technologies struck a deal with the county, offering financial incentives to replace jail visits with video calls. Families would pay fees that could exceed a dollar a minute to see their loved ones on an often grainy video feed; the county would earn a cut of the profits. "A lot of people will swipe that Mastercard and visit their grandkids," a county official told the press at the time.

A few years later, the county went after an even steeper commission. In the sheriff's office, a captain named Jason Gould helped negotiate a deal with a Securus competitor called Global Tel*Link (or GTL, now known as ViaPath), which included a fixed commission of a hundred and eighty thousand dollars a year, plus a sixty-thousand-dollar annual "technology grant," and twenty per cent of the revenue from video calls. The jail chose not to restore families' access to in-person visits. To celebrate the deal, an undersheriff joked to Gould, by e-mail, "You are not Captain Gold for nothing!"

County sheriffs across the country were making similar deals with Securus and GTL, which resulted in millions of dollars in commissions. Many of those counties replaced in-person visits with the companies' video calls. I first encountered such an arrangement in 2019, when I joined a family friend on a visit to the Skagit County Jail, in Washington State, where her son had recently awaited trial. Instead of holding her son's hand or sharing a meal with him, she'd deposited funds at a Securus kiosk, using a screen that read, across the top, "Send money here." (The jail, like most others, also offers the option of conducting video calls at home, from a personal device. Some jails provide a small number of free video visits, although families described those as hard to schedule.) At the Yale Investigative Reporting Lab, I worked with my colleague Eliza Fawcett to identify more than a hundred jails in thirty-six states which have replaced in-person visits with video calls. The Prison Policy Initiative calculates that hundreds more jails have done the same.

"The families aren't the ones who made these choices, but we're the ones who pay," Karla Darling, Le'Essa and Addy's mother, told me. "If you're a parent, and your significant other goes to jail, it's already extremely hard to raise

PHOTOGRAPH BY CYDNI ELLEDGE

your kids on your own, and to watch the toll it takes on your children." The financial stress could be severe. Darling said that, after the girls' grandmother died, she overdrew her bank account "so the kids could see their dad."

One day, Adam had an idea: Could the girls come to the jail and stand outside a window? Darling could tell how much Le'Essa and Addy wanted to go, so she brought them to a specific lamppost, allowing Adam to see Le'Essa and Addy from a distance, their faces framed by their curly hair. They performed a set of hand signals meant to communicate "I love you" which Adam had taught them. "We're freezing our tails off out here," Darling told him over the phone. "And we can't see anything but your 'fro." Still, the girls thought the trip had been worth it. "I felt super happy and excited that maybe our visit would help keep my dad going," Le'Essa said.

Last fall, Addy and Le'Essa learned that families in Michigan were planning to confront the county sheriffs in Genesee and nearby St. Clair, in addition to GTL and Securus. Two national nonprofits, Civil Rights Corps and Public Justice, were working with the families to lay the groundwork for a pair of innovative lawsuits, asserting that, under the Michigan constitution's due-process clause, people have a legal right to see their loved ones in local jails. Incarcerated people have tried to assert such a right in the past, but they have often been rebuffed in the courts. "What's novel about our legal argument is that it's brought by people who aren't incarcerated—mostly by kids, but also by parents," Cody Cutting, a lead attorney on the case, told me. The families hoped that, if they won, their lawsuits could serve as a model for the rest of the country.

Part of the broader strategy was to attract the attention of Tom Gores, the owner of the Detroit Pistons and the founder and C.E.O. of Platinum Equity, which acquired Securus in 2017. Gores grew up in Flint, not far from where the Hill girls live. After the water crisis hit, he raised more than ten million dollars to help the community. He has also invested in its schools, parks, and local groups. "I want to make sure kids in Flint have the same opportunities as everyone else," Gores told the Flint *Journal*, in 2021. Today, he owns a thirty-thousand-square-foot Los Angeles estate with a theatre complex, an indoor waterfall, and a beauty salon.

Le'Essa said that if she had a chance to speak with Gores and others in the industry she'd tell them, "Children need to see our parents. Some kids' whole entire lives are changed if they can't, and now they're on a whole different trajectory."

The modern prison-communication industry emerged four decades ago, after the federal government broke up A.T. & T.'s Bell System. New phone companies competed for customers by slashing prices. But inside prisons and jails a different model developed: telecom companies persuaded local officials to sign exclusive service contracts in exchange for hefty commissions. The costs of these commissions were passed along to incarcerated "customers" and their families, who lacked consumer choice. Price gouging was the inevitable result. By the nineties, prison phone-call prices in some jurisdictions had soared to twenty dollars for fifteen minutes.

In the early two-thousands, private equity entered the picture. Dozens of smaller companies were consolidated into two national juggernauts: GTL, which is backed by the private-equity firm American Securities, and Securus. "The American prison-communications market was appealing to private equity, in part because prisons and jails are recession-proof," Elizabeth Daniel Vasquez, the director of the Science and Surveillance Project at Brooklyn Defender Services, told me. Various players within the industry experimented with monetizing nearly every aspect of incarcerated people's daily lives, charging five cents a minute to read books on tablets, selling digital "stamps" required to send messages to people on the outside, and imposing steep fees on family members who sent funds for the commissary. Companies also began offering digital surveillance services that had soared in popularity after 9/11, including facial-recognition software for video calls and voice-identification technology.

"For decades, families and advocates have been working to push back on this industry," Bianca Tylek, who runs the nonprofit Worth Rises, told me. "Finally, in the past handful of years, we've seen incredible wins." In 2020, through a pandemic provision, the federal government made phone calls from its prisons free. So far, five states have followed suit. Last year, President Biden signed a major bill allowing the Federal Communications Commission to cap what the agency's leadership has called "predatory" pricing in some prison and jail communications. But county jails across the country had long since filled their visitation rooms with digital kiosks run by Securus and GTL. "The word 'visit' for these calls is a joke," Tylek said. "If I call my sister in Miami on FaceTime, I don't tell her, 'Hey, I'm visiting you in Miami!'"

Platinum Equity said that by the time it acquired Securus, in 2017, the company's contracts no longer stipulated that jails end or reduce traditional visits. Tom Gores even told the Detroit *Free Press*, "Ultimately, I think this industry really should be led probably not by private folks. I think it probably should be—I'll get killed for saying this—but the nonprofit business, honestly."

Platinum Equity says it supports changes to the industry. In a statement, it said that Securus products "provide an important connection between the incarcerated and their friends and families, but those products are not intended as a replacement for in-person visitation." But many of the jails where Eliza Fawcett and I examined contracts are refusing to restore regular in-person visits or are actively replacing them with commercial video calls. When I asked Platinum Equity whether Gores would consider offering video visitation only to jails and prisons that retain in-person visits, the company declined to comment. A spokesperson for Securus told me, of the St. Clair lawsuit, "The case against us in Michigan is misguided and without merit." ViaPath similarly denies the allegations in the lawsuit filed against GTL in Genesee County. A ViaPath spokesperson said, "Remote virtual visitation helps families who find the travel time and expense to visit in person burdensome." (Most families I met would agree—if the calls were higher quality, more affordable, and offered alongside in-person visits.)

Teresa Hodge, who heads the advisory board for Securus's parent company,

makes this argument in more personal terms. Hodge was previously incarcerated in federal prison, and now runs a reëntry organization called Mission: Launch. "What kept me feeling human and sane was my connection to my family," Hodge told me, of her time in prison, where she had access to phone calls but not to video-conferencing technology. As Hodge sees it, communities' frustration with Securus is "misplaced," and should be directed toward the criminal-justice system.

Tylek sees it differently. County jails "replaced all these visiting rooms, and they're not turning back," she told me. "The damage has been done."

In St. Clair County, the financial incentives were stark. Public records I reviewed showed that, after the jail eliminated in-person visits, call commissions almost tripled, from $154,131 in 2017 to $404,752 the following year. In February of 2018, a jail administrator wrote a cheerful e-mail to colleagues: "Well that is a nice increase in revenues!"

The county's accounting manager replied, "Heck yes it is!," adding, "Keeps getting bigger every month too." (Sheriff Mat King, of St. Clair County, declined to comment on the litigation. But King and the county filed a brief that noted, "There is nothing illegal or unethical about a County seeking other sources of revenue to lessen the burden on taxpayers.")

In Flint, Karla Darling told me, "Once a week, you'd get a free video visit, but only at very restricted times, and if that didn't fit your schedule it was 'Fuck you, you won't see your family.'" A couple of times, Darling said, she had to choose between keeping the heat or gas on in the house and paying the GTL bill. She found that the quality of the calls was so poor that half the time Le'Essa and Addy couldn't hear their dad; on some occasions, the jail failed to even get him to a kiosk for the call. (A spokesperson for Genesee County declined to comment, but Sheriff Christopher Swanson said that he had created some opportunities for in-person visits and was committed to providing more. "I fix problems," he told *The New Yorker*. "I celebrate families.")

Le'Essa told me that she'd been learning on TikTok about attachment styles, and was thinking about the trauma that can result from severing core-caretaker bonds. "I actually remember how, the first time my dad got locked up, when I was about three years old, we were allowed to go see him in person at the jail," she said. "That's how I found out, 'Oh, this is what my dad looks like, and this is what he smells like, and this is what he feels like.'"

Back then, Le'Essa remembers, her sister was "just a bald little baby with a big old head," and Adam got to hold her for an hour at a time. Now, at fifteen, Addy told me, "Not seeing my dad is causing real harm."

Last Valentine's Day, I travelled through a snowstorm to Flint. I'd come to join a team of young investigators from Civil Rights Corps and Public Justice as they met with prospective plaintiffs in living rooms, community centers, and coffee shops. A couple of private law firms are involved with the litigation effort, too, which they call the Right to Hug campaign.

I met up with Susan Li, a twenty-two-year-old Columbia graduate, who'd flown in from Brooklyn; two of her colleagues at Civil Rights Corps had driven from Chicago. Since October, Civil Rights Corps investigators had been visiting Le'Essa and Addy, who often had a rabbit draped over her shoulder or Lily the lizard in her hand. That day, though, they took me with them to the snow-encrusted home of a large family, the Lyles.

The breadwinner, Troy Lyle, had been locked up in the Genesee County Jail for more than a year, awaiting trial. (According to Swanson, more than ninety-eight per cent of the jail's current population is unsentenced; many inmates await trial in the facility for years.) Troy and his wife, Onisha, had been together for two decades—they'd met at a high-school sleepover, where he'd asked, "Can I take a picture with you?" Since Troy's arrest, Onisha had been raising their nine kids alone.

Onisha had told us to come by the house around 4 P.M. But when we arrived the kids let us in; Onisha wasn't home yet. An hour passed, then another. "Mom didn't work like this until Dad went to jail," the Lyles' seventeen-year-old, Shanyla, said. Onisha had mostly been a stay-at-home parent; Troy had made a decent living at an auto-body shop. Now Onisha went to work at a factory at 6 A.M., leaving the cleaning and the child care to Shanyla, who was trying to complete high school remotely. "It's too much," Shanyla said. "I'm overwhelmed, and I've had to grow up, but I'm tired of being here with the kids while they make a mess all day."

When Onisha finally arrived, she explained why she was late: GTL's online money-deposit system was broken, so she'd had to drive to a kiosk at the Genesee County Jail to put money on Troy's account.

Onisha knew the power of in-person visitation. Her own dad has been locked up since she was young. "It makes a huge difference to see him in person," she told me. She'd taken a seat at the kitchen table but kept on a pink faux-fur coat; her factory badge dangled from her neck. As a kid, Onisha said, she'd spent visiting-room hours making ramen, hugging, and playing a card game called I Declare War. Because of those visits, she said, she's remained close to her father: "My dad taught every single one of my kids how to tie their shoes."

As we spoke, Onisha's eleven-year-old son stood beneath a sign that read "Mom's Kitchen" and fixed his dinner: a microwaved White Castle burger and a Pop-Tart. Shanyla was back at the sink, washing a new pile of her siblings' dishes.

Shanyla told us that she looks forward to one day having her dad's meals again. "He'll put lamb chops on the grill!" she said, smiling. Troy had recently won a Crock-Pot in a cooking class at the jail; he was also taking a parenting class run by a group called Motherly Intercession. Those who attended the class could have a single hour-long parent-child visit.

The Lyles' seven-year-old said, "I wish I could do that in-person visit thirty times in a row." The twelve-year-old said, "I thought it was going to be long and fun. But it was only fun, and not long enough."

I met Troy Lyle at the jail in Flint last October, along with about a dozen other dads in the Motherly Intercession program. All the men wore maroon V necks and sat in green and blue plastic chairs. Lyle, a broad-shouldered man who likes roller-skating and swimming with his family, was particularly vocal. "You give us all these mental-

health classes here, but then you take away our ability to see our kids!" he said. "Our families *are* a part of our mental health—we are worried about our babies!" He told the group, "My youngest daughter was only a year old when I got locked up. She's two years old now, and she's really only used to seeing me on a video screen."

An older man offered up a theory about the jail's decision to end in-person visits. "The system is designed to take us from our families, so that we take a plea deal just to get back to them," he said. The whole group nodded. "We all know that when you're in the penitentiary at least you can see your family." He was referring to the fact that the state's prisons still facilitated regular in-person visits. "Here, they're trying to break us," the man insisted.

On the women's side of the jail, the desperation is even more extreme. The women report that at times they are placed on lockdown for twenty-three hours a day. Two mothers told me that, during the free hour, dozens of women compete for a limited number of kiosks, on which they hope to see their children's faces. One mother, whom I'll call Jane, recalled that physical and verbal altercations were constant. "Everyone wants to call their kids," she said.

"A lot of the women in the jail with me were deeply family-oriented people, but, because the calls were so outrageously expensive, I watched them break down into despair," Jane continued. A surreal economy arose: "Women would beg me, saying, 'I'll give you some noodles,' or 'I'll do your laundry,' or 'I'll do your hair and eyebrows'—whatever they could offer to afford a phone call to their kids. If you don't have money, you don't get to have ties to your family."

Some of the women had been separated from their infants or toddlers. Brya Bishop, a plaintiff in the Genesee County lawsuit, told me that she'd been breast-feeding her one-year-old when she was jailed: "My daughter barely ate for over two weeks, so I kept begging the jail, 'Can't I at least feed my daughter?'" (Swanson said that the jail follows an internal breast-feeding protocol.) She recalled that, for a long time, she couldn't get access to a working video kiosk. "I was terrified that my baby would forget my face," Bishop said. When she was finally released, after more than two years of pretrial detention, she felt that the toll on her kids was irreversible. "It broke our bond, and it caused deep damage and a loss of trust," she said. If she had been able to see them in person, she said, she could have "touched them, and kissed them, and reassured them, eye to eye."

America's correctional institutions have sometimes doubled as laboratories where incarcerated people serve as low-wage or nonconsensual test subjects. "Novel technologies are often first deployed on the most marginalized communities, in ways that later get expanded to the broader public," Albert Fox Cahn, the founder of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, told me. "We're just willing to treat people as guinea pigs when they're behind bars." Today, county jails are deploying mass data-gathering and new surveillance technologies offered by Securus and GTL, the Right to Hug lawsuits allege. But instead of incarcerated people being paid for their role as experimental subjects, they and their families are being made to pay.

GTL, for instance, offers a suite of products to help correctional facilities identify criminal behavior, including one called Call IQ. The company claims that this tool can be used to generate transcripts of calls and detect keywords, including "street terminology." The company says that it can also "capture and present users with a 'word cloud' showing new phrases being used within their population," which can reveal "hidden activities." In addition, GTL claims that it can perform a version of affect analysis on all participants in surveilled jail calls, "so an investigator can look for calls that start or end at a threshold of emotion (e.g., a happy tone versus a stressed tone)."

Securus, meanwhile, sells a surveillance product called THREADS, which subjects calls to keyword analysis, collects data on anyone who communicates with an incarcerated person, and shares intelligence with a range of investigative agencies. At one point, the company boasted on its Web site that the THREADS database included the names and addresses of more than six hundred thousand people. (That information has since been removed.) In October of 2022, Securus received a patent for a novel "behavior evaluation system" that could attempt to "monitor" and "analyze" the speech of people talking to incarcerated individuals, using a special ranking tool. If the company deemed a "non-resident's" behavior to be "good," it could provide the person with rewards, including free calls. ("The system has not been developed and is not being used," the company told me.)

"These companies are trying to detect people who are talking about potential crimes, using voice-to-text and pattern matching, but this is total pseudoscience," Cahn said. "People can be wrongly flagged for totally normal conversations."

A half-dozen legal experts also expressed concern about potential privacy and civil-rights violations. In 2020, an investigation by the *Maine Monitor* revealed that jails with Securus contracts had recorded eight hundred and thirty-seven confidential conversations between incarcerated people and their attorneys. In Kansas, Securus settled a lawsuit after more than five hundred people allegedly had calls with attorneys recorded. (Both Securus and GTL say they provide notifications that a call is being recorded before a party accepts the call.) And, last June, a deputy marshal in Del Rio, Texas, pleaded guilty to illegally using a Securus service to locate people with whom he had personal relationships. Securus

discontinued that service—which reportedly allowed agencies to track almost any cell phone in the country within seconds, without a warrant—after multiple incidents of abuse.

Lucas Marquez, a civil-rights advocate with Brooklyn Defender Services, recently testified that these new digital surveillance tools, which sometimes retain data indefinitely, have the effect of punishing communities of color for not being able to pay bail. "If a person could afford bail and was not held in our city jails, law enforcement could only eavesdrop on that person's communications with a specifically issued warrant," Marquez told a New York City Council committee last year. On April 15th, Brooklyn Defender Services and several other groups, including the Bronx Defenders, filed suit against the New York City Department of Correction, alleging that it operates, with Securus, "a mass surveillance project primarily targeting Black, brown, and low-income New Yorkers." (A D.O.C. deputy commissioner said in a statement that the "monitoring of phone calls is essential for the safety of all staff and every person in custody." A spokesperson for Securus said that its partners "determine and communicate their requirements for monitoring and recording all outbound calls.")

The Lyle children were alert to the fact that video calls with their dad were surveilled; their mom reminded them of it often. "I don't like that the police record our calls," Lyle's eleven-year-old son told me. Law enforcement and surveillance pervade their dreams, their group chats with friends, even their tantrums. Recently, after one of Lyle's video calls with his two-year-old daughter dropped out, the girl said, "The police hung up on my daddy!"

Le'Essa and Addy Hill were also preoccupied with surveillance. "When I share really personal things about my own mental health to my dad, I don't want random people listening," Le'Essa told me. The possibility that she was being surveilled made her feel like she couldn't speak truthfully. She also knew that asking her dad too many questions could jeopardize his case: recordings of calls are routinely accessed by prosecutors and used against defendants in court. Karla Darling, the girls' mom, told me that, because of these fears, Le'Essa and Addy's calls to their dad were like "a medicine and a poison at the same time."

In a few parts of the country, families of incarcerated people have been pushing back against the loss of in-person visits and, on occasion, winning. I recently spoke with Garry McFadden, the sheriff in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, who was elected on a platform that included restoring in-person visitation to the county jail; children with incarcerated parents had lobbied him on the issue.

"I made a special area for face-to-face visits, where fathers can play games with their children, read them books, hold them," McFadden said. "Not one of those young men has acted out since." McFadden has kept the video-call system, for people who have trouble getting to the jail or who feel more comfortable at home, and insists that facilities can easily do both. "But, the truth is, every sheriff isn't going to do that," he told me, "because they're in the good-old-boys club or the thin-blue-line club."

In Knoxville, Tennessee, families who in 2018 formed a group called Face to Face Knox discovered that, after their county contracted with Securus and eliminated in-person visits, assault rates at the jail went up. "We had so much momentum," Julie Gautreau, one of the organizers, told me. "Then the pandemic hit, and we got completely stonewalled."

Gautreau still stews over a detail that the group uncovered. A senior officer at the Knox County Detention Facility had reportedly claimed that replacing in-person visits with video visitation would be "great for families," and that incarcerated people could even "see their pets." Gautreau learned that a month after the officer left his job at the jail he took a position with a company that had installed Knox County's video kiosks.

On a sunny day in early March, the Civil Rights Corps investigator Susan Li flew back to Flint, for the ninth and final time before the lawsuits' filing. She pulled up outside the green clapboard house, where Karla Darling had baked a chicken. Addy showed Li the glass enclosure where she kept her lizard, not far from her posters of Billie Eilish and Harry Styles. She also showed off her dad's boxing trophies; years ago, Adam had been a three-time Golden Gloves recipient. "I hope this lawsuit does what it intends to do," Addy said. "My dad has a good heart, and I want to be closer to him, but all this stuff has kind of gotten in the way."

Li could relate. Her own dad, she'd told Addy and Le'Essa, had been incarcerated when she was just thirteen. Growing up in New Jersey, Li hid the fact that he was in prison from even her closest friends until she turned eighteen. Around the time of Li's nineteenth birthday, in April of 2020, her dad contracted COVID-19 in prison; he died soon afterward. She had to watch his funeral on a video screen. Li started advocating for the rights of incarcerated people and their families. "This was how I could honor him and keep my love alive," she told me. In 2021, she testified before a New York State Senate committee, asking, "Is my father not human and was his life not precious?" Now, in Flint, Li hoped that she could offer the Hill girls some reassurance: coming forward with their stories could be its own form of healing.

When she wasn't working late hours at Subway, Le'Essa had been studying the history of American inequality, from slavery to post-colonial conflict, on TikTok. "I got lucky to not have a bad algorithm," she said. But she'd started to notice a disheartening pattern: for most of history, she said, "even when people noticed and called out things that were really bad, the people in power just switched things up a bit, and got their way."

Le'Essa hoped that the lawsuits could break the pattern. "I really care about younger people, and how the 'weaker links' get treated," she said. Adam had recently been transferred to state prison, where the family is allowed to visit. Still, Le'Essa felt anxious that she and her sister might be ignored, or even punished, for their part in the Right to Hug campaign. "What if the sheriff just finds a script to try to shut us up, and makes us feel like we can't do anything?" she asked. Le'Essa saw the task ahead as hard but not impossible—a bit like climbing a tree without branches. ♦

NEIGHBORLY

BY PAUL RUDNICK

Mrs. Burgus sued Rush, Dr. Braun and her insurance company over claims that he and Dr. Sachs had implanted false memories in her head. They settled out of court in 1997 for $10.6 million.

"I began to add a few things up and realized there was no way I could come from a little town in Iowa, be eating 2,000 people a year, and nobody said anything about it," Mrs. Burgus told the Chicago Tribune in 1997.

—The Times.

My name is Margaret Jo Stinson, and I'd like to share my own perspective on this sort of thing. I live in Birchberry, Nebraska, population two hundred and thirty-eight, and my neighbor of more than fifteen years is Teresa Krell, who is sweet as a bug. Every morning, on my way to work at my boutique, Stinson's Yarnables, Crochet Caddies & More, I wave to Teresa, who just yesterday was sitting on her porch in her housecoat and slippers, picking her teeth with what appeared to be a human femur.

I have no interest in cannibal-shaming anyone, and, again, Teresa couldn't be more friendly. On Halloween, she always hands out gift bags stuffed with treats, including what she calls "cinnamon pinkies." Last Christmas, we worked side by side at our church bake sale, with me contributing my signature whole-grain walnut-chive biscuits, and Teresa generously donating more than fifty cupcakes, frosted with buttercream and decorated with sprinkles, love, and molars.

I'm not saying that Teresa leads a satanic cult in her finished basement, but, when I asked her about the large duct-tape pentagram on her laminate flooring, she explained, "It came to me in a dream where I attended junior college and my art teacher was Walter Beelzebub, who purchased my soul in return for a pre-owned Chevy Equinox and one of those sectionals with cup holders." Not my business. Sometimes after midnight I hear wolves howling and voices chanting, "Serve the Dark Lord and buy him twenty-four-roll packs of paper towels at Costco," but then I remember that Teresa gets Hulu and sometimes falls asleep with her flat-screen on. I chatted with Pastor Meersman about whether satanic worship is real, and he offered me a cup of tea and asked if I ever checked the menu at Olive Garden for Genuine Tuscan-Style Lungs.

Of course, with Ozempic and all, everyone's always counting calories. So, when I saw Teresa putting a batch of skulls in her recycling bin, I said, "But how do you stay so trim?" Teresa told me, "It's all about portion control and letting my kids have the spleen." Did this disturb me? Not really, but I did notice that Teresa hadn't separated her bubble wrap and Styrofoam takeout containers from the blood-spattered nuns' habits. I thought about suggesting OxiClean, which gets out even stubborn grass stains, but just then Teresa lightheartedly called out, "Margaret Jo—catch!," and I found myself holding a foot that still had a Croc on it.

I decided to do a Google search about cannibalism and human sacrifice, and you know what? It turns out that those are America's third and fourth most popular rainy-day activities, right after board games and before matricide. I wondered what I'd do if I came home and found my teen-age daughter Kayleigh and her friends KayLee and Kayleen snacking on their pep-squad captain, Kaylette, and I decided at least they wouldn't be glued to a bunch of screens. I asked Kayleigh if she ever feels pressured to experiment with nontraditional Lunchables, and she just rolled her eyes and said, "Geez, Mom, it's called healthy eating. Get a life. Or an ear that hasn't been treated with pesticides."

Live and learn. At today's book club, Teresa suggested that we read a how-to guide called "Dismemberment for Dummies," and it looks interesting, although I still haven't finished last week's novel, which Teresa calls "a real page-turner," about a woman who murders her neighbor with a snowblower, sells the torso on eBay as a collectible, and falls for a handsome widowed farmer because she admires his warm smile and all the crumbling outbuildings on his isolated property. I also just saw that Teresa seems to be growing horns and a tail, but when I asked about them she shook her head, grinned ruefully, and said, "Menopause. You'll see."

So the moral is, when you come across a discarded buttock while Weedwacking, or if you catch yourself thinking, What would it be like to become immortal if it meant feeding on entrails, maybe seasoned with Entrail Helper?, don't be too hard on yourself. I've got to skedaddle and answer the door, because I can see Teresa wearing a hazmat suit and ringing my bell, alongside everyone in our spin class, and they're carrying pitchforks and napkins. As Teresa once told me, small towns are just gift baskets filled with solid values and homemade cobbler that screams. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

PERSONAL HISTORY

TABULA RASA

Volume Four.

BY JOHN McPHEE

THE WORDLE PHILOSOPHY

In a cogent sense, I have spent, at this writing, about eighty-eight years preparing for Wordle. I work with words, I am paid by the word, I majored in English, and today I major in Wordle. On the remote chance that someone in the English-speaking world who is unfamiliar with Wordle ever happens upon this essay, I should explain that Wordle is a simple, straightforward online game. Each day, a five-letter word is hiding in the cloud, and you have six guesses to name it. On a grid five squares wide and six rows high, you enter your first guess. If your first guess is correct, it was something like a fifteen-thousand-to-one shot and feels like winning a lottery. Wordle responds to your first guess by filling in the background of each of your letters with one of three colors. The background turns charcoal gray if the letter is not part of the day's secret word, yellow if the letter is in the word but not in that position, and green if the letter is right for the position it is in.

You may choose OCEAN as your first guess, for example, and when you touch the Enter key the backgrounds of four of those letters fill in gray. The other is E and its background is now yellow. E is in the word you seek but not in the middle, as it is in OCEAN. You study this graphic information, and carefully devise a second guess. You have known since pre-K that in English there are five and a half vowels and 20.5 consonants. Vowels grease the skids, so a useful second guess will include other vowels. Try SUITE. Enter. A gray background fills in behind the S and the U. The T turns yellow. The E in its new position remains yellow, but the I is green. You go off into a confidence-rattling realm of digraphs and rogue "y"s. You think "realm" might be the target word someday. You sober up. If succeeding in two is just a luckshot feat (I did it nine times last year), the third guess is in the insight zone. With a nervous pen, I list letters that remain available, and I get out my digraph chart, featuring thirty-some items like "bl," "th," "tr," "sh," "gn," "sl," and "cr." I stare at SUITE. With that I green in the middle, the T and E yellow, I try TRIED. Enter. The I and the E are now green and so is the T! At this point—the fourth guess—Wordle often seems to be playing itself. Statistically, about half of my Wordlequests end in four. After TRIED, I try THIEF, and the five squares in the fourth row turn green and wiggle.

The Guess Levels of Wordle

1. Lottery
2. Luckshot
3. Insight
4. Autodidact
5. Buffoon
6. D.U.I.

I know a research physicist at the Institut Polytechnique in Paris whom Wordle put out of business with "wryly." He could be done in again, slyly. After a streak of a hundred straight successes, I was busted on the hundred-and-first, by two vowels and two "r"s: "riper." Two months later, I am not over it and don't hope to be. Ocean, juice, tiger, cider, river, riser—*busted*.

You can start with any five-letter word you choose, as long as it isn't proper. I have used vague, suave, juice, poise, abode, quoit, laity, voice, ideal, cameo, abide, cause, maize, orate, image, moxie, outer, arise, vireo, viola, emoji, patio, radio, louse, vogue, biota, sauce, laude, route, gauze, aerie, ounce, adieu, ouija, aside, mouse, audio, ratio, media, abuse, avoid, outre, omega, imbue, beaut, audit, ukase, movie, raise, irate, pause, atone, curie, rouse, and yodel, but my all-time preference is ocean.

Ocean, chair, batch, yacht—a mid-March progression, just one more example from the autodidact zone, but it caused me to wonder about the "ch" in "yacht." What would an expert call it? A silent digraph? I wrote to Mary Nor-

ILLUSTRATION BY SEB AGRESTI

ris. Once known as the Pencil Lady, Mary is the author of books on language ("Between You & Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen," "Greek to Me") and for several decades was a copy editor, grammarian, query proofreader, and page O.K.'er at *The New Yorker*. She would not be intimidated by the "ch" in "yacht."

It's a "velar fricative," Mary wrote back. "That is the actual name of the ch in yacht. I'd call it a vestigial guttural consonant cluster and avoid having it for breakfast. From the Dutch (jaght), who always sound like they're choking. It took me all day yesterday!"

PROOFREADING

A cover story I wrote sixty years ago for *Time* declared that Richard Burton was not petty. The piece went to press, and when the magazine came out it said that Burton was not pretty. Meaningless typos are bad enough, but typos that make sense are exponentially worse: "cook" for "look," "fool" for "cool," "lust" for "must," "sissy fit" for "hissy fit." The first law of proofreading is that no one cares as much as the author, with the possible exception of the author's mother.

My mother, who died at the age of a hundred, read the galley proofs of every one of my books as long as she was able to. When both of us were done, we compared galleys. Always, she found typos I had not, and vice versa. We both found typos that had not been found by the editors and proofreaders of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, my publisher. My mother had an occasional question for me. Why did I lowercase "god"? Why was "God" sometimes uppercased? "There are different ways to say god damn it," I said, and suggested that we move along.

Reading proofs one time, I came upon a sentence in which 1492, a presumed error, had been changed to 1942. Crack a joke and watch it disappear. The 1492 was just hyperbole, a way of saying "ages ago." Forget it. In the same set of proofs, fifty million shad were migrating up the Columbia River. Fifty million was an error ten times fact. Where did it come from? *The New Yorker*? No. In the magazine, five million shad went up the river. The mistake was unaccountable, but also caught. In my book contracts with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, a clause added long ago states that if other publishing houses are licensed to publish my paperbacks they will require that their professional proofreaders meet with me and compare what we have found. The need for such contractual clauses first arose after a paperback "Encounters with the Archdruid" arrived in the mail with a color photograph of the Grand Canyon on the cover, all but obscured by two pen-and-ink sketches of the head of David Brower, the protagonist, and each head had a cartoon balloon coming out of its mouth containing a quote from Brower.

As a result of this excrescence, I asked for contractual approval of paperback covers. Roger Straus agreed. In time, the number of such clauses added to my contracts would exceed thirty-five. Meanwhile, not long after the "Archdruid" catastrophe but with the new clauses in the contracts, Farrar, Straus licensed the paperbacks of "The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed" and "The Curve of Binding Energy" to Ballantine Books. The cover art was sent to me for my approval. "The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed" was about an experimental aircraft—a hybrid of an airplane and a rigid airship—that could fly like a plane and land on a dime, and would revolutionize air-freight transportation. The project happened to have been initiated and continued to be run by Presbyterian ministers. Ballantine's cover ignored aviation and showed a guy in a clerical collar looking holy. "The Curve of Binding Energy" was about special nuclear material in the hands of private industry and the possibility of its being stolen by subnational groups for purposes of making atomic bombs. Ballantine's cover art consisted of a large keyhole, through which the reader could peep at a subnational group making a bomb—Blacks, Chicanos, white hoodlums in leather jackets and shades.

So I rejected both Ballantine covers. Ballantine's solution was to do them over as all-type covers, no pictures or drawings. Ballantine also told Roger Straus never again to submit to them a book by me. So Roger made a paperback deal with Bantam Books for "Coming Into the Country," my book on Alaska. I went to Bantam myself for a talk with its president, in which I said that my book was essentially about people who had migrated to Alaska from the Lower Forty-eight, and that the last thing appropriate for the paperback cover was a big fat Eskimo in a wolf ruff. Bantam sent the book to an artist in Wales. Back from Wales came a big fat Eskimo in a wolf ruff. Bantam shrugged and changed the cover.

Meanwhile, the text had to be proofread. Bantam hired a professional and required that she go through her finished read with me. We met at Bantam's offices, in Manhattan, and she was not just cold; she was furious. She said she did not miss typos and did not make mistakes, and being summoned to go over proofs with me was a personal and professional insult. I said I was sorry she felt that way, but that I had many times experienced the need to compare proofs, and had it in my contracts. Could we just sit down and make the best of it? In some sort of cubicle there, we sat down and made the best of it. On the second or third galley was a typo corrected by her that I had completely missed. Next came a typo that she had not found. It surprised her. We found others that I had missed, then two more that she had missed. She said she was embarrassed, and quietly began to apologize. I told her not to, told her she was obviously better at it than I was, and her discoveries were rescuing my book. Tension was turning into compatibility, and I think I can say that both of us enjoyed the rest of that morning together.

Typographical errors are more elusive than cougars. One of my sons-in-law, the poet Mark Svenvold, wrote a nonfiction book called "Big Weather," about tornadoes and people who chase them, from meteorologists to simple gawkers. Mark went to Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas, and rode around with both categories. When "Big Weather" appeared in hardcover, a sentence in the opening paragraph mentioned "the Gulf of New Mexico." Where did that mutinous "New" come from, a typo right up there with "pretty" for "petty"? Mark said it was unaccountable. For a starter, I suggested that he look in his computer, if the original

"I got into medicine because I have a passion for confirming people's birthdays."

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manuscript was still there. It was, and in that first paragraph was the Gulf of New Mexico. Remarkable, yes, but think where that paragraph had been. It had been read by a literary agent, an acquisitions editor, an editorial assistant, a copy editor, a professional proofreader, at least one publicity editor—and not one of these people had noticed the goddam Gulf of New Mexico.

LITWILL

Long ago, it occurred to me that after my death I might regret not having written a literary will. In my relationships with publishers other than *The New Yorker* and Roger Straus—and, truth be told, in scattered moments with them—I had reached for enough band-aids to make the impetus acute. So I wrote a literary will. It was appended to my contract for "The Ransom of Russian Art," which was published in 1994, and has been in the contract for each of the eight books that have followed. It applies to earlier books as well, and is meant to provide instructions, down to the last comma, for future handling of my work. Almost any prose paragraph can be dated to the era in which it was written. In any swatch of prose, neologisms will stand out. I worried that some editors, while meaning to be helpful and useful, might modernize the text and paralyze the writing. Basically, my wish is that things be left as they are. The will:

It is my wish that future editors respect my thoughts about various matters like inches versus centimetres and miles versus kilometres and the choice in which altitude is expressed and personal habits of punctuation and so forth. In the case of the units of measure, I have used both (but mainly the English system) because we are living in a time of transition, and, in the United States at the moment, both apply. Sometimes, to express that fact indirectly—and for rhythm, and for other considerations—I have used metric measurements in one part of a sentence and English measurements in another. But never do I say something like "seventeen miles (27.359 kilometres)" because that is oafish, and I hope and pray that no sentence of mine is ever "improved" in such manner by a well-meaning editor who doctors my texts so that the two forms of measurement are presented in linear translation. Equally, I would spin in my grave if such an editor were to change an English measurement to a metric measurement, ruining whatever flow and rhythm the sentence in its original form managed to achieve. If something is in inches, feet, miles, leave it just as is, even after the entire country has embraced the metric system and miles have gone the way of leagues and rods. In general, please follow to the letter—and to the last absent or present punctuation mark—the Farrar, Straus & Giroux editions of my books. If you do, you will not dismantle various idiosyncrasies of style and punctuation that I chose to employ or create. If a comma is not there, please do not insert it. If commas are not there in adjectival strings, it was my intention that commas not be there. If you come upon an exxecutive, preserve him. He worked for Exxon. If, in "In Suspect Terrain," you come upon the words "new and far between," the words I intended were "new and far between." If William Penn's daughter wants a "rod and real," stet "real." If someone is "called to an office and chewed," do not add "out." In that instance, I preferred to leave it out. If a rule is probed, as in "the exception that probes the rule," stet "probes." If something is described as "avalanchine," I did not intend to say "avalanching." If the text says "porpentine," please do not change it to "porcupine." Where "The Founding Fish" refers to Reds Grange, Reds plural is what I meant. In "La Place de la Concorde Suisse," foreign words are not italicized—and are not to be italicized. The same applies to "Tabula Rasa." In the title piece of "Giving Good Weight," the rationale with respect to italics was more complex. Please carefully follow the original text in FSG editions. In "Annals of the Former World" and its component books, if updating is done in the light of advances in scien-

tific research please cover such matters in footnotes. Please also handle in footnotes and not in textual alterations anything to do with money, including but not limited to pounds, guineas, shillings, halfpennies, farthings, francs, pesetas, lire, dollars, Deutschmarks, yen, and euros. Titles are never to be altered. And please never title a collection of my work "The Best of . . . ." Such titles are false in nature and demean work that is not included. In my various books, photographs, drawings, charts, maps, and the like have been used sparingly or not at all. That was intentional. I wanted the pictures to be done in words. I don't mean to lay down a rigid guideline here, but please consider respectfully the editions of my lifetime and use them generally as models. They are fairly but not wholly consistent. For example, more than two dozen maps were made specifically for "Annals of the Former World" by Raven Maps & Images, of Medford, Oregon. In "The Ransom of Russian Art," the reproductions of dissidents' paintings are integral components of the book and their locations within it are not random. Notes underlying this literary will and other items that may have occurred to me after this date are in my computer in a Kedit file called Litwill. FSG. My books have been proofread with exceptional care by proofreaders at FSG, by proofreaders at *The New Yorker* magazine, by myself, and by others. In more than a million words, there are probably fewer than ten typographical errors. Please do not fix one unless textual evidence allows you to be absolutely positive that you have found one of those ten. I warmly thank you for your attention to these words.

FINAL EXAM

In the Journalism and Creative Writing programs at Princeton University, the course I taught consisted of twelve seminars and a picnic, not to mention scheduled private conferences in which I pretended to be the student's editor and we went through my marginalia on the student's latest essay one semicolon at a time. Not a few former students have kept my marginalia and throw them back at me from time to time, even in public settings. There were no exams. The picnic, in May, was under a monument on the Princeton Battlefield or in a park pavilion beside the Delaware and Raritan Canal, or back in the classroom if it rained. B.Y.O. sandwiches. I brought the chips and the pretzels. I also brought paper, pencils, some photocopied syntactical entertainment, and two tests.

The syntactical entertainment included actual statements by car drivers on insurance forms:

As I reached an intersection, a hedge sprang up obscuring my vision and I did not see the other car.

In my attempt to kill a fly, I drove into a telephone pole.

The guy was all over the road. I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.

The other car collided with mine without giving warning of its intentions.

The indirect cause of the accident was a little guy in a small car with a big mouth.

Obtained from university presses were swatches of professorial prose in the original manuscripts of scholarly books:

This serial procedure is of course slower than the parallel one, but it takes much longer.

The meeting had been preceded by some prior ones.

These three men all received their degrees from the University of Chicago where they first became friends, and later each was to be a preceptor at Princeton and still later to become three of the leaders of the American mathematical community.

The three men evidently became nine.

The dissertation was written in a single draft with no revisions in order to retain an interpretive stance. As a result, there is some repetition and some ponderous expressions, and the total is rather long.

The late Charles Patrick Crow was an editor of nonfiction pieces at *The New Yorker*. He did not acquire manuscripts. They were assigned to him after they were bought. With the exceptions of fly-fishing and family, Crow had a distanced, not to say

"Let there be light hors d'œuvres."

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cynical, view of most aspects of this world. He kept in his wallet a little blue card that bore selected sentences from manuscripts bought by the magazine:

> Very likely, if we knew the answer to this question we wouldn't have to ask it.
>
> Until the orchestra didn't exist, composers didn't write music for it, and instrumentalists didn't form such groups because there was no music for them to perform.
>
> Grey-haired, yet crewcut, he was clean, precise and appeared somewhat cold, just as one would expect a surgeon.
>
> These two atolls being studied prior to returning the people that had been removed from those atolls prior to the nuclear testing.

I also offered the young writers a parable from particle physics, quite possibly the oddest metaphor ever applied to the writing process. The weapons designer Theodore B. Taylor, whose atomic bombs were very small and very large, spent a lot of time worrying about the slow production of plutonium. He thought of a solution to the problem. In my book "The Curve of Binding Energy," I tried to describe it:

> The A.E.C.'s plants at Hanford and Savannah River were literally dripping it out, and Ted thought he saw a way to make a truly enormous amount of plutonium in a short time. He wanted to wrap up an H-bomb in a thick coat of uranium and place it deep in arctic ice. When it was detonated, the explosion would make plutonium-239 by capturing neutrons in uranium-238—exactly what happened in a reactor. The explosion would also turn a considerable amount of ice into a reservoir of water, which could easily be pumped out to a chemical plant on the surface, where the plutonium would be separated out. Why not?

There were those who had an answer to that question, and Ted Taylor's MICE—megaton ice-contained explosions—would serve only as a message to young writers: No matter what kind of writing you are doing, you want desperately to get it done. You yearn for one great, perfect, and explosive outburst. Impossible. Like a driver reactor, you have to drip it out.

That was the serious finale of my course, but I always had more to impose. Passing out pencils and sheets of paper, I informed the picnicking class that the time had come for their final exam (an event of which they had not previously been aware). O.K., I would say, hoping and failing to shake them up, this is your final exam. Everything rides on it, including the honor system. Write these twenty words and spell them correctly. Moccasin.

I gave them plenty of time to wonder if there were two "c"s and two "s"s or one "c" and two "s"s or two "c"s and one "s." Next?

Asinine.

Braggadocio.

Rarefy, liquefy, pavilion, vermilion, impostor, accommodate. By now, they were flunking out. Years before I even started to teach, I had clipped the test from *Esquire*, where T. K. Brown III, compiler of the twenty words, wrote that "impostor" is the most misspelled word in the English language and "accommodate" is the word misspelled in the greatest variety of ways.

Mayonnaise.

Impresario.

Supersede, desiccate, titillate, resuscitate, inoculate, rococo, consensus, sacrilegious, obbligato.

Raise your hand if you spelled all twenty correctly.

No hands.

Nineteen?

In 1975, Nina Gilbert raised her hand.

Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen . . . Across the years, zero to very few hands would go up until the countdown got into the twelve-to-six range. After six, for humanitarian reasons, I stopped asking for hands. At Nina Gilbert's level, in five decades, no one else would raise a hand.

Nina Gilbert was a music major. She became an arranger and composer of choral music, ran education programs for the Boston Lyric Opera, and taught sequentially at Hamilton, Lafayette, U.C. Irvine, and the Webb Schools, in Claremont, California.

There was a last and deceptive segment of the final exam. The deceptive aspect was that it seemed simple and wasn't. There are eleven words in the English language that end in "umble." What are they?

Pencils flew as the students attacked this easy question. Bumble, crumble, fumble, grumble, humble, jumble, mumble, rumble, stumble, tumble . . . Ten quick words. The luck stopped there. Erasers were bitten into. Like lamps turning off, success turned into failure. Logoparalysis set in.

One year, after the picnic, I happened to get a call from my daughter Sarah, in Atlanta, and I told her about the eleven words in the English

language that end in "umble." Could she name them?

Sarah said, "Well, let's see. There's 'scumble,' and . . ."

The elusive eleventh was Sarah's first umble. She is an architectural historian, at this writing chair of art history at Emory University. Scumble is a delicate, final layer that painters have used to give their subjects the appearance of being seen through mist. Webster's Second International defines it as a verb, "to render less brilliant by covering with a thin coat of opaque or semiopaque color applied with a nearly dry brush," and as a noun, "a softened effect produced by scumbling." The technique was employed by Titian in the sixteenth century, Rubens and Rembrandt in the seventeenth, J. M. W. Turner in the nineteenth, Claude Monet on into the twentieth—Monet's scumbled water lilies, the scumbled ambience of his Rouen Cathedral.

As it happens, scumble is what I see all day long, or something much like it. Ninety-two at this writing, I have a stent in each eyeball as a result of advanced glaucoma. My world is brushed with mist. I mentioned scumble to my eye surgeon, Sarah Kuchar. She said she is always looking for ways to describe what her patients see, and she was gratefully adding "scumble" to her vocabulary.

ALFRED A. KNOPF

The *New Yorker* I joined in 1965 did not publish profiles of dead people. When I turned in a piece about an old person, William Shawn, the magazine's one-man constitution, considerately published it soon after I submitted it. I once thought of doing a profile of Alfred A. Knopf, who was born in 1892, but I never did so, in part because of the age factor, and in part, truth be told, because the piece might have been redolent with spite. In college, I had written, as a "creative thesis," a stillborn novel that was little more than an academic exercise. Whatever life it might have had expired as it was written. But of course, at the time, I did not assess it as such, and I sent it to several New York publishers, who rejected it seriatim—Random House, Charles Scribner's Sons, Alfred A. Knopf. Dudley Johnson, one of my professors in the English department, competing with me in naïveté, suggested that I write to Alfred Knopf himself, asking for the readers' reports. From them, said Johnson, I might glean thoughts that would serve me well in future efforts.

Alfred himself wrote back to me, saying that his company never released its readers' reports, adding, gratuitously, this:

> The readers' reports in the case of your manuscript would not be very helpful, and I think might discourage you completely.

This was the letter that caused my mother to say, "Someone should go in there and k-nock his block off."

Two decades later, when some of my longer pieces were running in *The New Yorker*—"Encounters with the Archdruid," "The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed," "The Curve of Binding Energy"—I had to commute from my home in New Jersey to the magazine's offices, at 25 West Forty-third Street, because the technology that would eventually make it possible to close a piece remotely was far off in the future. So I was in the city for weeks at a time, and I often had lunch with Anthony M. Schulte, an employee at the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., where he was a rising star.

Bob Gottlieb, who worked there with Tony and some years later became the

editor of *The New Yorker*, told the New York *Times* in 2012, "Tony was a rare fossil—a gentleman publisher." Tony had drowned in one of the Rangeley Lakes, in Maine. He dove into the lake on his first day there in that 2012 season, and did not come up.

I had known Tony since he was nine years old and I was eight. He would be educated at Yale and the Harvard Business School. His career in publishing began at Simon & Schuster and moved on to Knopf and eventually to Random House, which owned Knopf. We had met at the summer camp Keewaydin, near Middlebury, Vermont, and had proceeded together, through its several age levels, on hiking trips in the Green Mountains and long canoe trips in the Adirondacks, both Maine and Canada being out of range because of gas rationing and other limitations during the Second World War. We made the Honor Trip, in Saranac country, including streams, ponds, and portages west of Upper Saranac Lake. Tony was a boxer. On Saturday evenings at Keewaydin, under overhead lights, he slowly and methodically stalked his opponents, always with a gentle smile, and when the bout ended after three rounds the ref always lifted Tony's arm. Always. Summer after summer, he was Best Boxer. There was also an award for Best Camper, and, annually, Tony Schulte won that, too.

In this narrative, I have now come to the day I have been aiming at, on which I showed up at the Knopf offices to collect Tony and go to lunch. I was standing beside Tony's desk while Tony shuffled some last-minute memos and stood up to go. His office door was open to a corridor and, just then, Alfred Knopf walked by. The year was in the seventies, Knopf in his eighties. Tony called to him, "Alfred, come in a minute. There's someone here I want you to meet."

Knopf joined us, and Tony said, "Alfred, this is John McPhee." In that exact instant, seemingly cued by my name, Alfred Knopf's eyes narrowed to a stare, and his arms stiffened at his sides. Very slowly, his arms began to rise, came up like wings, while his falcon eyes stayed on me and blazed. The arms went on up until they were high above his head.

By now, of course, Tony and I had realized that Alfred Knopf was having a seizure. Tony wondered if I knew what to do. I did not. Tony called out to Knopf's assistant, and she summoned an in-house first responder. This was not Alfred's first working seizure. Tony and I went off to lunch. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

CONVICTION

Lucy Letby, the most notorious nurse in Britain, was found guilty of killing seven babies. Did she do it?

BY RACHEL AVIV

Last August, Lucy Letby, a thirty-three-year-old British nurse, was convicted of killing seven newborn babies and attempting to kill six others. Her murder trial, one of the longest in English history, lasted more than ten months and captivated the United Kingdom. The *Guardian*, which published more than a hundred stories about the case, called her "one of the most notorious female murderers of the last century." The collective acceptance of her guilt was absolute. "She has thrown open the door to Hell," the *Daily Mail* wrote, "and the stench of evil overwhelms us all."

The case galvanized the British government. The Health Secretary immediately announced an inquiry to examine how Letby's hospital had failed to protect babies. After Letby refused to attend her sentencing hearing, the Justice Secretary said that he'd work to change the law so that defendants would be required to go to court to be sentenced. Rishi Sunak, the Prime Minister, said, "It's cowardly that people who commit such horrendous crimes do not face their victims."

The public conversation rushed forward without much curiosity about an incongruous aspect of the story: Letby appeared to have been a psychologically healthy and happy person. She had many close friends. Her nursing colleagues spoke highly of her care and dedication. A detective with the Cheshire police, which led the investigation, said, "This is completely unprecedented in that there doesn't seem to be anything to say" about why Letby would kill babies. "There isn't really anything we have found in her background that's anything other than normal."

The judge in her case, James Goss, acknowledged that Letby appeared to have been a "very conscientious, hard working, knowledgeable, confident and professional nurse." But he also said that she had embarked on a "calculated and cynical campaign of child murder," and he sentenced her to life, making her only the fourth woman in U.K. history condemned to die in prison. Although her punishment can't be increased, she will face a second trial, this June, on an attempted-murder charge for which the jury could not reach a verdict.

Letby had worked on a struggling neonatal unit at the Countess of Chester Hospital, run by the National Health Service, in the West of England, near Wales. The case centered on a cluster of seven deaths, between June, 2015, and June, 2016. All but one of the babies were premature; three of them weighed less than three pounds. No one ever saw Letby harming a child, and the coroner did not find foul play in any of the deaths. (Since her arrest, Letby has not made any public comments, and a court order has prohibited most reporting on her case. To describe her experiences, I drew from more than seven thousand pages of court transcripts, which included police interviews and text messages, and from internal hospital records that were leaked to me.)

The case against her gathered force on the basis of a single diagram shared by the police, which circulated widely in the media. On the vertical axis were twenty-four "suspicious events," which included the deaths of the seven newborns and seventeen other instances of babies suddenly deteriorating. On the horizontal axis were the names of thirty-eight nurses who had worked on the unit during that time, with X's next to each suspicious event that occurred when they were on shift. Letby was the only nurse with an uninterrupted line of X's below her name. She was the "one common denominator," the "constant malevolent presence when things took a turn for the worse," one of the prosecutors, Nick Johnson, told the jury in his opening statement. "If you look at the table overall the picture is, we suggest, self-evidently obvious. It's a process of elimination."

But the chart didn't account for any other factors influencing the mortality rate on the unit. Letby had become the country's most reviled woman—"the unexpected face of evil," as the British magazine *Prospect* put it—largely because of that unbroken line. It gave an impression of mathematical clarity and coherence, distracting from another possibility: that there had never been any crimes at all.

Since Letby was a teen-ager, she had wanted to be a nurse. "She'd had a difficult birth herself, and she was very grateful for being alive to the nurses that would have helped save her life," her friend Dawn Howe told the BBC. An only child, Letby grew up in Hereford, a city north of Bristol. In high school, she had a group of close friends who called themselves the "miss-match family": they were dorky and liked to play games such as Cranium and Twister. Howe described Letby as the "most kind, gentle, soft friend." Another friend said that she was "joyful and peaceful."

Letby was the first person in her family to go to college. She got a nursing degree from the University of Chester, in 2011, and began working on the neonatal unit at the Countess of Chester Hospital, where she had trained as a student nurse. Chester was a hundred miles from Hereford, and her parents didn't like her being so far away. "I feel very guilty for staying here sometimes but it's what I want," she told a colleague in a text message. She described the nursing team at the Countess as "like a little family." She spent her free time with other nurses from the unit, often appearing in pictures on Facebook in flowery outfits and lip gloss, with sparkling wine in her hand and a guileless smile. She had straight blond hair, the color washing out as she aged, and she was unassumingly pretty.

The unit for newborns was built in

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Colleagues reportedly called Letby an "angel of death," and the Prime Minister, echoing a nation, condemned her.

ILLUSTRATION BY VARTIKA SHARMA

"Do you want the volume set to barely audible dialogue or overwhelmingly loud music?"

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1974, and it was outdated and cramped. In 2012, the Countess launched a campaign to raise money to build a new one, a process that ended up taking nine years. "Neonatal intensive care has improved in recent years but requires more equipment which we have very little space for," Stephen Brearey, the head of the unit, told the Chester *Standard*. "The risks of infection for the babies is greater, the closer they are to each other." There were also problems with the drainage system: the pipes in both the neonatal ward and the maternity ward often leaked or were blocked, and sewage occasionally backed up into the toilets and sinks.

The staff were also overtaxed. Seven senior pediatricians, called consultants, did rounds on the unit, but only one was a neonatologist—a specialist in the care of newborns. An inquest for a newborn who died in 2014, a year before the deaths for which Letby was charged, found that doctors had inserted a breathing tube into the baby's esophagus rather than his trachea, ignoring several indications that the tube was misplaced. "I find it surprising these signs were not realised," the coroner said, according to the *Daily Express*. The boy's mother told the paper that "staff shortages meant blood tests and X-rays were not assessed for seven hours and there was one doctor on duty who was splitting his time between the neonatal ward and the children's ward."

The N.H.S. has a totemic status in the British psyche—it's the "closest thing the English have to a religion," as one politician has put it. One of the last remnants of the postwar social contract, it inspires loyalty and awe even as it has increasingly broken down, partly as a result of years of underfunding. In 2015, the infant-mortality rate in England and Wales rose for the first time in a century. A survey found that two-thirds of the country's neonatal units did not have enough medical and nursing staff. That year, the Countess treated more babies than it had in previous years, and they had, on average, lower birth weights and more complex medical needs. Letby, who lived in staff housing on the hospital grounds, was twenty-five years old and had just finished a six-month course to become qualified in neonatal intensive care. She was one of only two junior nurses on the unit with that training. "We had massive staffing issues, where people were coming in and doing extra shifts," a senior nurse on the unit said. "It was mainly Lucy that did a lot." She was young, single, and saving to buy a house. That year, when a friend suggested that she take some time off, Letby texted her, "Work is always my priority."

In June, 2015, three babies died at the Countess. First, a woman with antiphospholipid syndrome, a rare disorder that can cause blood clotting, was admitted to the hospital. She was thirty-one weeks pregnant with twins, and had planned to give birth in London, so that a specialist could monitor her and the babies, but her blood pressure had quickly risen, and she had to have an emergency C-section at the Countess. The next day, Letby was asked to cover a colleague's night shift. She was assigned one of the twins, a boy, who has been called Child A. (The court order forbade identifying the children, their parents, and some nurses and doctors.) A nursing note from the day shift said that the baby had had "no fluids running for a couple of hours," because his umbilical catheter, a tube that delivers fluids through the abdomen, had twice been placed in the wrong position, and "doctors busy." A junior doctor eventually put in a longline, a thin tube threaded through a vein, and Letby and another nurse gave the child fluid. Twenty minutes later, Letby and a third nurse, a few feet away, noticed that his oxygen levels were dropping and that his skin was mottled. The doctor who had inserted the longline worried that he had placed it too close to the child's heart, and he immediately took it out. But, less than ninety minutes after Letby started her shift, the baby was dead. "It was awful," she wrote to a colleague afterward. "He died very suddenly and unexpectedly just after handover."

A pathologist observed that the baby had "crossed pulmonary arteries," a structural anomaly, and there was also a "strong temporal relationship" between the insertion of the longline and the collapse. The pathologist described the cause of death as "unascertained."

Letby was on duty again the night after Child A's death. At around midnight, she helped the nurse who had been assigned to the surviving twin, a girl, set up her I.V. bag. About twenty-five minutes later, the baby's skin became purple and blotchy, and her heart rate dropped. She was resuscitated and recovered. Brearey, the unit's leader, told me that at the time he wondered if the twins had been more vulnerable because of the mother's disorder; antibodies for it can pass through the placenta.

The next day, a mother who had been diagnosed as having a dangerous placenta condition gave birth to a baby boy who weighed one pound, twelve ounces, which was on the edge of the weight threshold that the unit was certified to treat. Within four days, the baby developed acute pneumonia. Letby was not working in the intensive-care nursery, where the baby was treated, but after the child's oxygen alarm went off she came into the room to help. Yet the staff on the unit couldn't save the baby. A pathologist determined that he had died of natural causes.

Several days later, a woman came to the hospital after her water broke. She was sent home and told to wait. More than twenty-four hours later, she noticed that the baby was making fewer movements inside her. "I was concerned for infection because I hadn't been given any antibiotics," she said later. She returned to the hospital, but she still wasn't given antibiotics. She felt "forgotten by the staff, really," she said. Sixty hours after her water broke, she had a C-section. The baby, a girl who was dusky and limp when she was born, should have been treated with antibiotics immediately, doctors later acknowledged, but nearly four hours passed before she was given the medication. The next night, the baby's oxygen alarm went off. "Called Staff Nurse Letby to help," a nurse wrote. The baby continued to deteriorate throughout the night and could not be revived. A pathologist found pneumonia in the baby's lungs and wrote that the infection was likely present at birth.

"We lost [her]," Letby texted a close friend I'll call Margaret, a shift leader on the unit. Margaret had mentored Letby when she was a student training on the ward.

"What!!!!! But she was improving," Margaret replied. "What happened? Wanna chat? I can't believe you were on again. You're having such a tough time."

Letby told Margaret that the circumstances of the death might be investigated.

"What, the delay in treatment?"

"Just overall," she said. "And reviewing what antibiotics she was on, etc., if it is sepsis." Letby wrote that she was still in shock. "Feel a bit numb."

"Oh hun, you need a break," Margaret said. Reflecting on the first of the three deaths, Margaret told her that the baby's parents would always grieve the loss of their child but that, because of the way Letby had cared for him, they'd hopefully have no regrets about the time they spent with their son. "Just trying to help you take the positives you deserve from tough times," Margaret wrote. "Always here. Speak later. Sleep well xxx."

A few days later, Letby couldn't stop crying. "It's all hit me," she texted another friend from the unit. She wrote that two of the deaths seemed comprehensible (one was "tiny, obviously compromised in utero," and the other seemed septic, she wrote), but "it's [Child A] I can't get my head around."

The senior pediatricians met to review the deaths, to see if there were any patterns or mistakes. "One of the problems with neonatal deaths is that preterm babies can die suddenly and you don't always get the answer immediately," Brearey told me. A study of about a thousand infant deaths in southeast London, published in *The Journal of Maternal-Fetal & Neonatal Medicine*, found that the cause of mortality was unexplained for about half the newborns who had died unexpectedly, even after an autopsy. Brearey observed that Letby was involved in each of the deaths at the Countess, but "it didn't sound to me like the odds were that extreme of having a nurse present for three of those cases," he said. "Nobody had any concerns about her practice."

The head of the pediatrics department, Ravi Jayaram, told me, "There was an element of 'Thank God Lucy was on,' because she's really good in a crisis." He described Letby as "very popular" among the nurses. To make sense of the events, Jayaram said, "you sort of think, Well, maybe the baby wasn't as stable as we thought, and maybe that longline was in just a bit far, and it got into the heart and caused a heart-rhythm problem. You try and make things fit, because we like to have an explanation—for us and for the parents—and it's much harder to say, 'I'm sorry. I don't know what went on.'"

Four months later, another baby died. She had been born at twenty-seven weeks, just past the age that the unit treated. At one point, she was transferred to another hospital, called Arrowe Park, for more specialized care—she had an infection and a small bleed in her brain—but after two nights she returned to the Countess, where her condition deteriorated. Brearey told me, "Senior nursing staff were blaming the neonatal unit that sent back the baby, saying that they hadn't been entirely honest, that they were just trying to clear a space." The baby's mother worried that the staff at the Countess were too busy to pay proper attention to her daughter. She recalled that a nurse named Nicky was "sneezing and coughing whilst putting her hands in [the baby's] incubator." She added, "To top it off, whilst Nicky was in the room, the doctor, who was seeing another baby, asked Nicky if she was full of a cold, to which she said, 'Yeah, I've been full of it for days.' So even the doctors were aware and didn't do anything." In a survey the next year of more than a thousand staff members at the Countess, about two-thirds said that they had felt pressure to come to work even when they were ill. (None of the hospitals mentioned in this piece would comment, citing the court order.)

The staff tried to send the girl to a specialized unit at a different hospital, but, while they were waiting to confirm the transfer, she began struggling to breathe. Her designated nurse was not yet trained in intensive care, and she shouted for help. Letby, who had been assigned to a different baby, came into the room, followed by two doctors, but the baby continued to decline and could not be revived.

A doctor later saw Letby crying with another nurse. "It was very much on the gist of 'It's always me when it happens, my babies,'" the doctor said, adding that

this seemed like a normal reaction. Letby texted Margaret that she had spoken with the neonatal-unit manager, Eirian Powell, who had encouraged her to "be confident in my role without feeling the need to prove myself, which I have felt recently."

Three of the nurses on the ward attended the baby's funeral, and Letby gave them a card addressed to the child's parents. "It was a real privilege to care for [her] and to get to know you as a family, a family who always put [her] first and did everything possible for her," she wrote. "She will always be a part of your lives and we will never forget her. Thinking of you today and always."

Jayaram, who was on duty during the girl's death, discussed the events with Brearey and another pediatrician. " 'You know what's funny?'" he said that he told them. " 'It was Lucy Letby who was on.' And we all looked at each other and said, 'You know, it's always Lucy, isn't it?'"

They shared their concerns about the correlation with senior management, and Powell conducted an informal review. "I have devised a document to reflect the information clearly and it is unfortunate she was on," she wrote to Brearey. "However each cause of death was different."

The next month, Letby, who was in a salsa group, got out of class and saw three missed calls: the nurses on the unit had called her because they didn't know how to give a baby intravenous immunoglobulin treatment. "Just can't believe that some people were in a position when they don't know how to give something, what equipment to use and not being supported by manager," Letby texted her best friend, a nurse I'll call Cheryl. "Staffing really needs looking at." She described the unit as "chaos" and a "madhouse."

One of the senior pediatricians, Alison Timmis, was similarly distressed. She e-mailed the hospital's chief executive, Tony Chambers, to complain that staff on the unit were "chronically overworked" and "no one is listening." She wrote, "Over the past few weeks I have seen several medical and nursing colleagues in tears." Doctors were working shifts that ran more than twenty hours, she explained, and the unit was so busy that "at several points we ran out of vital equipment such as incubators." At another point, a midwife had to assist with a resuscitation, because there weren't enough trained nurses. "This is now our normal working pattern and it is not safe," Timmis wrote. "Things are stretched thinner and thinner and are at breaking point. When things snap, the casualties will either be children's lives or the mental and physical health of our staff."

At the end of January, 2016, the senior pediatricians met with a neonatologist at a nearby hospital, to review the ward's mortality data. In 2013 and 2014, the unit had had two and three deaths, respectively. In 2015, there had been eight. At the meeting, "there were a few learning points, nothing particularly exciting," Brearey recalled. Near the end, he asked the neonatologist what he thought about the fact that Letby was present for each death. "I can't remember him suggesting anything, really," Brearey said.

But Jayaram and Brearey were increasingly troubled by the link. "It was like staring at a Magic Eye picture," Jayaram told me. "At first, it's just a load of dots," and the dots are incoherent. "But you stare at them, and all of a sudden the picture appears. And then, once you can see that picture, you see it every time you look, and you think, How the hell did I miss that?" By the spring of 2016, he said, he could not "unsee it."

Many of the deaths had occurred at night, so Powell, the unit manager, shifted Letby primarily to day shifts, because there would be "more people about to be able to support her," she said.

In June, 2016, three months after the change, Cheryl texted Letby before a shift, "I wouldn't come in!"

"Oh, why?" Letby responded.

"Five admissions, 1 vent."

"OMG," Letby responded.

Cheryl added that a premature boy with hemophilia looked "like shit." His oxygen levels had dropped during the night. Letby took over his care that morning, and doctors tried to intubate him, but they were unable to insert the tube, so they called two anesthesiologists, who couldn't do it, either. The hospital didn't have any factor VIII, an essential medicine for hemophiliacs. Finally, they asked a team from Alder Hey Children's Hospital, which was thirty miles away, to come to the hospital with factor VIII. A doctor from Alder Hey intubated the child on the first try. "Sat having a quiet moment and want to cry," Letby wrote to a junior doctor, whom I'll call Taylor, who had become a close friend. "Just feel like I've been running around all day and not really achieved anything positive for him."

A week later, a mother gave birth to identical triplet boys, born at thirty-three weeks. When she was pregnant, the mother said, she had been told that each baby would have his own nurse, but Letby, who had just returned from a short trip to Spain with friends, was assigned two of the triplets, as well as a

third baby from a different family. She was also training a student nurse who was "glued to me," she complained to Taylor. Seven hours into Letby's shift, one of the triplet's oxygen levels dropped precipitously, and he developed a rash on his chest. Letby called for help. After two rounds of CPR, the baby died.

The next day, Letby was the designated nurse for the two surviving triplets. The abdomen of one of them appeared distended, a possible sign of infection. When she told Taylor, he messaged her, "I wonder if they've all been exposed to a bug that benzylpenicillin and gentamicin didn't account for? Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, just don't want to be here really," Letby replied. The student nurse was still with her, and Letby told Taylor, "I don't feel I'm in the frame of mind to support her properly."

A doctor came to check on the triplet with the distended abdomen, and, while he was in the room, the child's oxygen levels dropped. The baby was put on a ventilator, and the hospital asked for a transport team to take him to Liverpool Women's Hospital. As they were waiting, it was discovered that the baby had a collapsed lung, possibly a result of pressure from the ventilation, which was set unusually high. "There was an increasing sense of anxiety on the unit," Letby said later. "Nobody seemed to know what was happening and very much just wanted the transport team to come and offer their expertise." The triplets' mother said that she was alarmed when she saw a doctor sitting at a computer "Googling how to do what looked like a relatively simple medical procedure: inserting a line into the chest." She was also upset that one of the doctors who was resuscitating her son was "coughing and spluttering into her hands" without washing them. Shortly after the transport team arrived, the second triplet died. His mother recalled that Letby was "in pieces and almost as upset as we were."

While dressing the baby for his parents—a standard part of helping grieving families—Letby accidentally pricked her finger with a needle. She hadn't eaten or taken a break all day, and as she was waiting to get her finger checked she fainted. "The overall enormity of the last two days had sort of taken its toll," she said. "To imagine what those parents had gone through to lose two of their babies, it was harrowing."

The surviving triplet was taken to Liverpool Women's Hospital, and his mother felt that the clinical staff there were more competent and organized. "The two hospitals were as different as night and day," she said.

That night, Brearey called Karen Rees, the head of nursing for urgent care, and said that he did not want Letby returning until there was an investigation. The babies' deaths seemed to be following Letby from night to day. Rees discussed the issue with Powell, and she said that Powell told her, "Lucy Letby does everything by the book. She follows policy and procedure to the letter." Rees allowed Letby to keep working. "Just because a senior healthcare professional requests the removal of a nurse—there has to be sound reason," Rees said later.

The next day, Letby was assigned a baby boy, known as Child Q, who had a bowel infection. At one point, he was sent to Alder Hey, but he was transferred back within two days. Taylor texted Letby that Alder Hey was "so short of beds that they can only accommodate emergency patients. It's not good holistic care, and it's rubbish for his parents."

Letby was also taking care of another newborn in a different room, and, while she was checking on that baby, Child Q vomited and his oxygen levels dropped. After he stabilized, John Gibbs, a senior pediatrician, asked another nurse which staff members had been present during the episode.

"Do I need to be worried about what Dr Gibbs was asking?" Letby texted Taylor after her shift.

"No," he reassured her. "You can't be with two babies in different nurseries at the same time, let alone predict when they're going to crash."

"I know, and I didn't leave him on his own. They both knew I was leaving the room," she said, referring to a nurse inside the room and one just outside.

"Nobody has accused you of neglecting a baby or causing a deterioration," he said.

"I know. Just worry I haven't done enough."

"How?" he asked

"We've lost two babies I was caring for and now this happened today. Makes you think am I missing something/good enough," she said.

"Lucy, if anyone knows how hard you've worked over the last 3 days it's me," he wrote. "If anybody says anything to you about not being good enough or performing adequately I want you to promise me that you'll give my details to provide a statement."

"Well I sincerely hope I won't ever be needing a statement," she said. "But thank you. I promise."

Letby was supposed to work the next night, but at the last minute Powell called and told her not to come in. "I'm worried I'm in trouble or something," Letby wrote to Cheryl.

"How can you be in trouble?" Cheryl replied. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"I know but worrying in case they think I missed something or whatever," Letby said. "Why leave it until now to ring?"

"It's very late, I agree," Cheryl said. "Maybe she's getting pressure from elsewhere."

"She was nice enough, I just worry," Letby responded. "This job messes with your head."

Letby worked three more day shifts and then had a two-week vacation. Brearey, Jayaram, and a few other pediatric consultants met to discuss the unexpected deaths. "We were trying to rack our brains," Brearey said. A postmortem X-ray of one of the babies had shown gas near the skull, a finding that the pathologist did not consider particularly meaningful, since gas is often present after death. Jayaram remembered learning in medical school about air embolisms—a rare, potentially catastrophic complication that can occur when air bubbles enter a person's veins or arteries, blocking blood supply. That night, he searched for literature about the phenomenon. He did not see any cases of murder by air embolism, but he forwarded his colleagues a four-page paper, from 1989, in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, about accidental air embolism. The authors of the paper could find only fifty-three cases in the world. All but four of the infants had died immediately. In five cases, their skin became discolored. "I remember the physical chill that went

down my spine," Jayaram said. "It fitted with what we were seeing."

Jayaram and another pediatrician met with the hospital's executive board, as well as with the medical and nursing directors, and said that they were not comfortable working with Letby. They suggested calling the police. Jayaram said that the board members asked them, " 'What's the evidence?' And we said, 'We haven't got evidence, but we've got concerns.'" To relieve the general burden on the unit, the directors and the board decided to downgrade the ward from Level II to Level I: it would no longer provide intensive care, and women delivering before thirty-two weeks would now go to a different hospital. The board also agreed to commission a review by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, to explore what factors might explain the rise in mortality.

After Letby returned from vacation, she was called in for a meeting. The deputy director of nursing told her that she was the common element in the cluster of deaths, and that her clinical competence would need to be reassessed. "She was distraught," Powell, the unit manager, who was also at the meeting, said. "We were both quite upset." They walked straight from the meeting to human resources. "We were trying to get Lucy back on the unit, so we had to try and prove that the competency issue wasn't the problem," Powell said.

But Letby never returned to clinical duties. She was eventually moved to an administrative role in the hospital's risk-and-safety office. Jayaram described the office as "almost an island of lost souls. If there was a nurse who wasn't very good clinically, or a manager who they wanted to get out of the way, they'd move them to the risk-and-safety office."

After she'd been away from clinical duties for more than a month, Letby texted Cheryl that she'd spoken with her union representative, who had advised her not to communicate with other staff, since they might be involved in reviewing her competence. "Feel a bit like I'm being shoved in a corner and forgotten about," she wrote. "It's my life and career."

"I know it's all so ridiculous," Cheryl said.

"I can't see where it will all end."

THEOLOGY

Do you remember when I tried to be good.

It was a bad time.

So much was burning without a source.

I'm sorry I was so young.

I didn't mean it.

It's just this thing is heavy.

How could anyone hold all of it & not melt.

I thought gravity was a law, which meant it could be broken.

But it's more like a language. Once you're in it

you never get out. A fool, I climbed out the window

just to look at the stars.

It was too dark & the crickets sounded like people I know

saying something I don't.

I think I had brothers.

Think I heard them crying once, then laughing, until the laughing

was just in my head.

That's how it is here: leaky.

One day, while crossing the creek, I met a boy.

"I'm sure this time after Christmas it'll all be a distant memory," Cheryl reassured her.

In September, 2016, Letby filed a grievance, saying that she'd been removed from her job without a clear explanation. "My whole world was stopped," she said later. She was diagnosed with depression and anxiety and began taking medication. "From a self-confidence point of view it completely—well, it made me question everything about myself," she said. "I just felt like I'd let everybody down, that I'd let myself down, that people were changing their opinion of me."

That month, a team from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health spent two days interviewing people at the Countess. They found that nursing- and medical-staffing levels were inadequate. They also noted that the increased mortality rate in 2015 was not restricted to the neonatal unit. Stillbirths on the maternity ward were elevated, too.

A redacted portion of the report, which was shared with me, described how staff on the unit were "very upset" that Letby had been removed from clinical duties. The Royal College team interviewed Letby and described her as "an enthusiastic, capable and committed nurse" who was "passionate about her career and keen to progress." The redacted section concluded that the se-

Lips red as a scraped knee.

When our eyes met, he gasped. Then raised his rifle.

That's how I found out I was a squirrel.

That's how I lost my tail, the only thing I was great at.

I don't know what my name is but I can feel it.

A throbbing in the blood.

Last night, I heard a voice & climbed

to the tallest branch, so high I forgot all the rules.

It was like being skinned into purpose.

Below me was a rectangle the man had been digging all night.

I watched him a long time, his body a question mark unravelling.

When the light grew pink, the man stopped.

Others, in black coats, gathered around him.

I know I was put here for a reason, but I spend most days

just missing everybody.

The man lowered a box into the slot he had dug.

As if pushing a coin into a giant machine.

That must be how they pay to be here.

—Ocean Vuong

nior pediatricians had made allegations based on "simple correlation" and "gut feeling," and that they had a "subjective view with no other evidence." The Royal College could find no obvious factors linking the deaths; the report noted that the circumstances on the unit were "not materially different from those which might be found in many other neonatal units within the UK." In a public statement, the hospital acknowledged that the review had revealed problems with "staffing, competencies, leadership, team working and culture."

In November, Jayaram was interviewed by an administrator investigating Letby's grievance. There had been reports of pediatricians referring to an "angel of death" on the ward, and the interview focussed on whether Jayaram had made his suspicions publicly known.

"Did you hear any suggestion that Lucy had been deliberately harming babies?" the administrator asked Jayaram, according to minutes of the interview.

"No objective evidence to suggest this at all," Jayaram responded. "The only association was Lucy's presence on the unit at the time."

"So to clarify, was there any suggestion from any of the consultant team that Lucy had been deliberately harming babies?"

"We discussed a lot of possibilities in private," he responded.

"So that's not a yes or no?"

"We discussed a lot of possibilities in private," Jayaram repeated.

The hospital upheld Letby's grievance. At a board meeting in January, 2017, Chambers, the chief executive, who was formerly a nurse, told the members, "We are seeking an apology from the consultants for their behavior." He wanted Letby back on the unit as soon as possible. In a letter to the consultants, Chambers expressed concern about their susceptibility to "confirmation bias," which he defined as a "tendency to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses." (Chambers said that he could not comment, because of the court order.)

Jayaram agreed to meet with Letby for a mediation session in March, 2017. A lithe, handsome man with tight black curls, Jayaram appeared frequently on TV as a medical expert, on subjects ranging from hospital staffing to heart problems. When the cluster of deaths began, he was on the reality series "Born Naughty?," in which he met eight children who had been captured on hidden cameras behaving unusually and then came up with diagnoses for them. Letby had prepared a statement for the meeting, and she read it aloud. "She said, 'I've got evidence from my grievance process that you and Steve Brearey orchestrated a campaign to have me removed,'" Jayaram recalled. "'I've got evidence that you were heard in the queue to the café accusing me of murdering babies.'" (Jayaram told me, "Now, I've got a big mouth, but I wouldn't stand in a public place doing that.") Letby asked if he would be willing to work with her. He felt obligated to say yes. "I came away from that meeting really angry, but I was not angry at her," he said. "I was angry at the system."

Jayaram and Brearey felt that they were being silenced by a hospital trying to protect its reputation. When I spoke with Brearey, he had recently watched a documentary about the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, and he described the plight of an engineer who had tried to warn his superiors that the shuttle had potentially dangerous flaws. Brearey saw his own experiences in a similar light. He and Jayaram had spent months writing e-mails to the hospital's management trying to justify why they wanted Letby out of the unit. They wrote

with the confidence of people who feel that they are on the right side of history.

Serial-killer health professionals are extraordinarily rare, but they are also a kind of media phenomenon—a small universe of movies and shows has dramatized the scenario. In northwest England, this genre of crime has not been strictly limited to entertainment. Harold Shipman, one of the most prolific serial killers in the world, worked forty miles from Chester, as a physician for the N.H.S. He is thought to have murdered about two hundred and fifty patients in the span of three decades, injecting many of them with lethal doses of a painkiller, before he was convicted, in 2000. The chair of a government inquiry into Shipman's crimes said that investigators should now be trained to "think dirty" about causes of death.

In April, 2017, with the permission of the Countess's leadership, Jayaram and another pediatrician met with a detective from the Cheshire police and shared their concerns. "Within ten minutes of us telling the story, the superintendent said, 'Well, we have to investigate this,'" Jayaram said. " 'It's a no-brainer.'"

In May, the police launched what they called Operation Hummingbird. A detective later said that Brearey and Jayaram provided the "golden thread of our investigation."

That month, Dewi Evans, a retired pediatrician from Wales, who had been the clinical director of the neonatal and children's department at his hospital, saw a newspaper article describing, in vague terms, a criminal investigation into the spike in deaths at the Countess. "If the Chester police had no-one in mind I'd be interested to help," he wrote in an e-mail to the National Crime Agency, which helps connect law enforcement with scientific experts. "Sounds like my kind of case."

That summer, Evans, who was sixty-seven and had worked as a paid court expert for more than twenty-five years, drove three and a half hours to Cheshire, to meet with the police. After reviewing records that the police gave him, he wrote a report proposing that Child A's death was "consistent with his receiving either a noxious substance such as potassium chloride or more probably that he suffered his collapse as a result of an air embolus." Later, when it became clear that there was no basis for suspecting a noxious chemical, Evans concluded that the cause of death was air embolism. "These are cases where your diagnosis is made by ruling out other factors," he said.

Evans had never seen a case of air embolism himself, but there had been one at his hospital about twenty years before. An anesthetist intended to inject air into a baby's stomach, but he accidentally injected it into the bloodstream. The baby immediately collapsed and died. "It was extremely traumatic and left a big scar on all of us," Evans said. He searched for medical literature about air embolisms and came upon the same paper from 1989 that Jayaram had found. "There hasn't been a similar publication since then because this is such a rare event," Evans told me.

Evans relied heavily on the paper in other reports that he wrote about the Countess deaths, many of which he attributed to air embolism. Other babies, he said, had been harmed through another method: the intentional injection of too much air or fluid, or both, into their nasogastric tubes. "This naturally 'blows up' the stomach," he wrote to me. The stomach becomes so large, he said, that the lungs can't inflate normally, and the baby can't get enough oxygen. When I asked him if he could point me to any medical literature about this process, he responded, "There are no published papers regarding a phenomenon of this nature that I know of." (Several doctors I interviewed were baffled by this proposed method of murder and struggled to understand how it could be physiologically or logistically possible.)

Nearly a year after Operation Hummingbird began, a new method of harm was added to the list. In the last paragraph of a baby's discharge letter, Brearey, who had been helping the police by reviewing clinical records, noticed a mention of an abnormally high level of insulin. When insulin is produced naturally by the body, the level of C-peptide, a substance secreted by the pancreas, should also be high, but in this baby the C-peptide was undetectable, which suggested that insulin may have been administered to the child. The insulin test had been done at a Royal Liverpool University Hospital lab, and a biochemist there had called the Countess to recommend that the sample be verified by a more specialized lab. Guidelines on the Web site for the Royal Liverpool lab explicitly warn that its insulin test is "not suitable for the investigation" of whether synthetic insulin has been administered. Alan Wayne Jones, a forensic toxicologist at Linköping University, in Sweden, who has written about the use of insulin as a means of murder, told me that the test used at the Royal Liverpool lab is "not sufficient for use as evidence in a criminal prosecution." He said, "Insulin is not an easy substance to analyze, and you would need to analyze this at a forensic laboratory, where the routines are much more stringent regarding chain of custody, using modern forensic technology." But the Countess never ordered a second test, because the child had already recovered.

Brearey also discovered that, eight months later, a biochemist at the lab had flagged a high level of insulin in the blood sample of another infant. The child had been discharged, and this blood sample was never retested, either. According to Joseph Wolfsdorf, a professor at Harvard Medical School who specializes in pediatric hypoglycemia, the baby's C-peptide level suggested the possibility of a testing irregularity, because, if insulin had been administered, the child's C-peptide level should have been extremely low or undetectable, but it wasn't.

The police consulted with an endocrinologist, who said that the babies theoretically could have received insulin through their I.V. bags. Evans said that, with the insulin cases, "at last one could find some kind of smoking gun." But there was a problem: the blood sample for the first baby had been taken ten hours after Letby had left the hospital; any insulin delivered by her would no longer be detectable, especially since the tube for the first I.V. bag had fallen out of place, which meant that the baby had to be given a new one. To connect Letby to the insulin, one would have to believe that she had managed to inject insulin into a bag that a different nurse had randomly chosen from the unit's refrigerator. If Letby had been successful at causing immediate death by air embolism, it seems odd that she would try this much less effective method.

In July, 2018, five months after the insulin discovery, a Cheshire police detective knocked on Letby's door. Two years earlier, she had bought a home a mile from the hospital. A small birdhouse hung beside the entrance. It was 6 A.M., but she opened the door with a friendly expression. "Can I step in for two seconds?" the officer asked her, after showing his badge.

"Uh, yes," she said, looking terrified.

Inside, she was told that she was under arrest for multiple counts of murder and attempted murder. She emerged from the house handcuffed, her face appearing almost gray.

The police spent the day searching her house. Inside, they found a note with the heading "NOT GOOD ENOUGH." There were several phrases scrawled across the page at random angles and without punctuation: "There are no words"; "I can't breathe"; "Slander Discrimination"; "I'll never have children or marry I'll never know what it's like to have a family"; "WHY ME?"; "I haven't done anything wrong"; "I killed them on purpose because I'm not good enough to care for them"; "I AM EVIL I DID THIS."

On another scrap of paper, she had written, three times, "Everything is manageable," a phrase that a colleague had said to her. At the bottom of the page, she had written, "I just want life to be as it was. I want to be happy in the job that I loved with a team who I felt a part of. Really, I don't belong anywhere. I'm a problem to those who do know me." On another piece of paper, found in her handbag, she had written, "I can't do this any more. I want someone to help me but they can't." She also wrote, "We tried our best and it wasn't enough."

After spending all day in jail, Letby was asked why she had written the "not good enough" note. A police video shows her in the interrogation room with her hands in her lap, her shoulders hunched forward. She spoke quietly and deferentially, like a student facing an unexpectedly harsh exam. "It was just a way of me getting my feelings out onto paper," she said. "It just helps me process."

"In your own mind, had you done anything wrong at all?" an officer asked.

"No, not intentionally, but I was worried that they would find that my practice hadn't been good," she said, adding, "I thought maybe I had missed something, maybe I hadn't acted quickly enough."

"Give us an example."

She proposed that perhaps she "hadn't played my role in the team. I'd been on a lot of night shifts when doctors aren't around. We have to call them. There are less people, and it just worried me that I hadn't called them—quick enough." She also worried that she might have given the wrong dose of a medication or used equipment improperly.

"And you felt evil?"

"Other people would perceive me as being evil, yes, if I had missed something." She went on, "It's how this situation made me feel."

The detective said, "You put down there, Lucy, that you 'killed them on purpose.'"

"I didn't kill them on purpose."

The detective asked, "So where's this pressure that's led to having these feelings come from?"

"I think it was just the panic of being redeployed and everything that happened," she said. She had written the notes after she was removed from clinical duties, but later her clinical skills were reassessed and no concerns were raised, so she felt more secure about her abilities. She was "very career-focussed," she said, and "it just all overwhelmed me at the time. It was hard to see how anything was ever going to be O.K. again."

In an interview two days later, an officer asked why one of her notes had the word "hate" in bold letters, circled. "What's the significance of that?"

"That I hate myself for having let everybody down and for not being good enough," she said. "I'd just been removed from the job I loved, I was told that there might be issues with my practice, I wasn't allowed to speak to people."

The officer asked again why she had written, "I killed them on purpose."

"That's how I was being made to feel," she said. As her mental health deteriorated, her thoughts had spiralled. "If my practice hadn't been good enough and I was linked with these deaths, then it was my fault," she said.

"You're being very hard on yourself there if you haven't done anything wrong."

"Well, I am very hard on myself," she said.

After more than nine hours of interviews, Letby was released on bail, without being charged. She moved back to Hereford, to live with her parents. News of her arrest was published in papers throughout the U.K. "All I can say is my experience is that she was a great nurse," a mother whose baby was treated at the Countess told the *Times* of London. Another mother told the *Guardian* that Letby had advocated for her and had told her "every step of the way what was happening." She said, "I can't say anything negative about her." The *Guardian* also interviewed a mother who described the experience of giving

"It doesn't work. You still look like a unicorn."

birth at the Countess. "They had no staff and the care was just terrible," she said. She'd developed "an infection which was due to negligence by a member of staff," she explained. "We made a complaint at the time but it was brushed under the carpet."

One of Letby's childhood friends, who did not want me to use her name because her loyalty to Letby has already caused her social and professional problems, told me that she asked the Cheshire police if she could serve as a character reference for Letby. "They weren't interested at all," she said. Letby seemed to be in a state of "terror and complete confusion," the friend said. "I could tell from how she was acting that she just didn't know what to say about it, because it was such an alien concept to be accused of these things."

Shortly after Letby's arrest, the pediatric consultants arranged a meeting for the hospital's medical staff, to broach the possibility of a vote of no confidence in Chambers, the hospital's chief executive, because of the way he'd handled their concerns. Chambers resigned before the meeting. A doctor named Susan Gilby, who took the side of the consultants, assumed his role. Gilby told me that the first time she met with Jayaram it was clear that he was suffering from the experience of not being believed by the hospital's management. "He was in tears, and bear in mind this is a mature, experienced clinician," she said. "He described having issues with sleeping, and he felt he couldn't trust anyone. It was really distressing." She was surprised that Ian Harvey, the hospital's medical director, still doubted the consultants' theory of how the babies had died. Harvey seemed more troubled by their behavior, she said, than by anything Letby had done. "In his mind, the issue seemed to be that they weren't as good as they thought they were," Gilby told me. "It was 'They think they're marvellous, but they need to look at themselves.'" (Harvey would not comment, citing the court order.)

The week of Letby's arrest, the police dug up her back garden and examined drains and vents, presumably to see if she had hidden anything incriminating. Four months later, while she remained out on bail without charges, the Chester *Standard* wrote, "The situation has caused many people to question both the ethics and legality of keeping someone linked to such serious allegations when seemingly there is not enough evidence to bring charges." Letby was arrested a second time, in 2019, but, after being interviewed for another nine hours, she was released.

In November, 2020, more than two years after Letby's first arrest, an officer called Gilby to inform her that Letby was being charged with eight counts of murder and ten counts of attempted murder. (Later, one of the murder counts was dropped, and five attempted-murder charges were added.) She was arrested again, and this time she was denied bail. She would await trial in prison. As a courtesy, Gilby called Chambers to let him know. She was taken aback when Chambers expressed concern for Letby. She said that he told her, "I'm just worried about a wrongful conviction."

In September, 2022, a month before Letby's trial began, the Royal Statistical Society published a report titled "Healthcare Serial Killer or Coincidence?" The report had been prompted in part by concerns about two recent cases, one in Italy and one in the Netherlands, in which nurses had been wrongly convicted of murder largely because of a striking association between their shift patterns and the deaths on their wards. The society sent the report to both the Letby prosecution and the defense team. It detailed the dangers of drawing causal conclusions from improbable clusters of events. In the trial of the Dutch nurse, Lucia de Berk, a criminologist had calculated that there was a one-in-three-hundred-and-forty-two-million chance that the deaths were coincidental. But his methodology was faulty; when statisticians looked at the data, they found that the chances were closer to one in fifty. According to Ton Derksen, a Dutch philosopher of science who wrote a book about the case, the belief that "such a coincidence cannot be a coincidence" became the driving force in the process of collecting evidence against de Berk. She was exonerated in 2010, and her case is now considered one of the worst miscarriages of justice in Dutch history. The Italian nurse, Daniela Poggiali, was exonerated in 2021, after statisticians reanalyzed her hospital's mortality data and discovered several confounding factors that had been overlooked.

"I hate it when they put kittens in the impulse-buying section."

William C. Thompson, one of the authors of the Royal Statistical Society report and an emeritus professor of criminology, law, and psychology at the University of California, Irvine, told me that medical-murder cases are particularly prone to errors in statistical reasoning, because they "involve a choice between alternative theories, both of which are rather extraordinary." He said, "One theory is that there was an unlikely coincidence. And the other theory is that someone like Lucy Letby, who was previously a fine and upstanding member of the community, suddenly decides she's going to start killing people."

Flawed statistical reasoning was at the heart of one of the most notorious wrongful convictions in the U.K.: a lawyer named Sally Clark was found guilty of murder, in 1999, after her two sons, both babies, died suddenly and without clear explanation. One of the prosecution's main experts, a pediatrician, argued that the chances of two sudden infant deaths in one family were one in seventy-three million. But his calculations were misleading: he'd treated the two deaths as independent events, ignoring the possibility that the same genetic or environmental factors had affected both boys.

In his book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (2011), Daniel Kahneman, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, argues that people do not have good intuitions when it comes to basic principles of statistics: "We easily think associatively, we think metaphorically, we think causally, but statistics requires thinking about many things at once," a task that is not spontaneous or innate. We tend to assume that irregular things happen because someone intentionally caused them. "Our predilection for causal thinking exposes us to serious mistakes in evaluating the randomness of truly random events," he writes.

Burkhard Schafer, a law professor at the University of Edinburgh who studies the intersection of law and science, said that it appeared as if the Letby prosecution had "learned the wrong lessons from previous miscarriages of justice." Instead of making sure that its statistical figures were accurate, the prosecution seems to have ignored statistics. "Looking for a responsible human—this is what the police are good at," Schafer told me. "What is not in the police's remit is finding a systemic problem in an organization like the National Health Service, after decades of underfunding, where you have overworked people cutting little corners with very vulnerable babies who are already in a risk category. It is much more satisfying to say there was a bad person, there was a criminal, than to deal with the outcome of government policy."

Schafer said that he became concerned about the case when he saw the diagram of suspicious events with the line of X's under Letby's name. He thought that it should have spanned a longer period of time and included all the deaths on the unit, not just the ones in the indictment. The diagram appeared to be a product of the "Texas sharpshooter fallacy," a common mistake in statistical reasoning which occurs when researchers have access to a large amount of data but focus on a smaller subset that fits a hypothesis. The term comes from the fable of a marksman who fires a gun multiple times at the side of a barn. Then he draws a bull's-eye around the cluster where the most bullets landed.

For one baby, the diagram showed Letby working a night shift, but this was an error: she was working day shifts at the time, so there should not have been an X by her name. At trial, the prosecution argued that, though the baby had deteriorated overnight, the suspicious episode actually began three minutes after Letby arrived for her day shift. Nonetheless, the inaccurate diagram continued to be published, even by the Cheshire police.

Dewi Evans, the retired pediatrician, told me that he had picked which medical episodes rose to the level of "suspicious events." When I asked what his criteria were, he said, "Unexpected, precipitous, anything that is out of the usual—something with which you are not familiar." For one baby, the distinction between suspicious and not suspicious largely came down to how to define projectile vomiting.

Letby's defense team said that it had found at least two other incidents that seemed to meet the same criteria of suspiciousness as the twenty-four on the diagram. But they happened when Letby wasn't on duty. Evans identified events that may have been left out, too. He told me that, after Letby's first arrest, he was given another batch of medical records to review, and that he had notified the police of twenty-five more cases that he thought the police should investigate. He didn't know if Letby was present for them, and they didn't end up being on the diagram, either. If some of these twenty-seven cases had been represented, the row of X's under Letby's name might have been much less compelling. (The Cheshire police and the prosecution did not respond to a request for comment, citing the court order.)

Among the new suspicious episodes that Evans said he flagged was another insulin case. Evans said that it had similar features as the first two: high insulin, low C-peptide. He concluded that it was a clear case of poisoning. When I asked Michael Hall, a retired neonatologist at University Hospital Southampton who worked as an expert for Letby's defense, about Evans's third insulin case, he was surprised and disturbed to learn of it. He could imagine a few reasons that it might not have been part of the trial. One is that Letby wasn't working at the time. Another is that there was an alternative explanation for the test results—but then, presumably, such an explanation could be relevant for the other two insulin cases, too. "Whichever way you look at this, that third case is of interest," Hall told me.

Ton Derksen, in his book about Lucia de Berk, used the analogy of a train. The "locomotives" were two cases in which there had been allegations of poisoning. Another eight cases, involving children who suddenly became ill on de Berk's shifts, were the "wagons," trailing along because of a belief that all the deaths couldn't have occurred by chance.

The locomotives in the Letby prosecution were the insulin cases, which were charged as attempted murders. "The fact that there were two deliberate poisonings with insulin," Nick Johnson, the prosecutor, said, "will help you when you are assessing whether the collapses and deaths of other children on the neonatal unit were because somebody

OTHER LANDS, OTHER CUSTOMS
When you leave New York, people might say "hello" in the elevator.
Good morning!
They are not getting all "up in your business."
Looks like it's gonna be a SCORCHER!
They are simply "making conversation." What they call "being friendly."
Glad it stopped raining!
Yes.
They're not doing it to torture you.
Have a nice day!
R. Chu

was sabotaging them or whether these were just tragic coincidences."

But not only were the circumstances of the poisonings speculative, the results were, too. If the aim was to kill, neither child came close to the intended consequences. The first baby recovered after a day. The second showed no symptoms and was discharged in good health.

On the first day of the trial, Letby's barrister, Benjamin Myers, told the judge that Letby was "incoherent, she can't speak properly." She had been diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder following her arrests. After two years in prison, she had recently been moved to a new facility, but she hadn't brought her medication with her. Any psychological stability she'd achieved, Myers said, had been "blown away."

Letby, who now startled easily, was assessed by psychiatrists, and it was decided that she did not have to walk from the dock to the witness box and instead could be seated there before people came into the room. The *Guardian* said that in court Letby "cut an almost pitiable figure," her eyes darting "nervously towards any unexpected noise—a cough, a dropped pen, or when the female prison guard beside her shuffled in her seat." Her parents attended the entire trial, sometimes accompanied by a close friend of Letby's, a nurse from the unit who had recently retired.

Press coverage of the case repeatedly emphasized Letby's note in which she'd written that she was "evil" and "killed them on purpose." Media outlets magnified the images of those words without including her explanations to the police. Much was also made of a text that she'd sent about returning to work after her trip to Spain—"probably be back in with a bang lol"—and the fact that she'd searched on Facebook thirty-one times for parents whose children she was later accused of harming. During the year of the deaths, she had also searched for other people 2,287 times—colleagues, dancers in her salsa classes, people she had randomly encountered. "I was always on my phone," she later testified, explaining that she did the searches rapidly, out of "general curiosity and they've been on my mind." (Myers noted that her search history did not involve any references to "air embolism.")

The parents of the babies had been living in limbo for almost a decade. In court, they recalled how their grief had intensified when they were told that their children's deaths may have been deliberately caused by someone they'd trusted. "That's what confuses me the most," one mother said. "Lucy presented herself as kind, caring, and soft-spoken." They had stopped believing their own instincts. They described being consumed by guilt for not protecting their children.

Several months into the trial, Myers asked Judge Goss to strike evidence given by Evans and to stop him from returning to the witness box, but the request was denied. Myers had learned that a month before, in a different case, a judge on the Court of Appeal had described a medical report written by Evans as "worthless." "No court would have accepted a report of this quality," the judge had concluded. "The report has the hallmarks of an exercise in working out an explanation" and "ends with tendentious and partisan expressions of opinion that are outside Dr. Evans' professional competence." The judge also wrote that Evans "either knows what his professional colleagues have concluded and disregards it or he has not taken steps to inform himself of their views. Either approach amounts to a breach of proper professional conduct." (Evans said that he disagreed with the judgment.)

Evans had laid the medical foundation for the prosecution's case against Letby, submitting some eighty reports. There was a second pediatric expert, who provided what was called "peer review" for Evans, as well as experts in hematology, endocrinology, radiology, and pathology, and they had all been sent Evans's statements when they were invited to participate in the case. The six main prosecution experts, along with at least two defense experts who were also consulted, had all worked for the N.H.S. Evans

wasn't aware if Letby's lawyers had sought opinions from outside the U.K., but he told me that, if he were them, he would have looked to North America or Australia. When I asked why, he said, "Because I would want them to look at it from a totally nonpartisan point of view."

In the five years leading up to the trial, some of the experts' opinions seemed to have collectively evolved. For one of the babies, Evans had originally written that the child had been "at great risk of unexpected collapse," owing to his fragility, and Evans couldn't "exclude the role of infection." The prosecution's pathologist, Andreas Marnerides, who worked at St. Thomas' Hospital in London, wrote that the child had died of natural causes, most likely of pneumonia. "I have not identified any suspicious findings," he concluded. But, three years later, Marnerides testified that, after reading more reports from the courts' experts, he thought that the baby had died "with pneumonia," not "from pneumonia." The likely cause of death, he said, was administration of air into his stomach through a nasogastric tube. When Evans testified, he said the same thing.

"What's the evidence?" Myers asked him.

"Baby collapsed, died," Evans responded.

"A baby may collapse for any number of reasons," Myers said. "What's the evidence that supports your assertion made today that it's because of air going down the NGT?"

"The baby collapsed and died."

"Do you rely upon one image of that?" Myers asked, referring to X-rays.

"This baby collapsed and died."

"What evidence is there that you can point to?"

Evans replied that he'd ruled out all natural causes, so the only other viable explanation would be another method of murder, like air injected into one of the baby's veins. "A baby collapsing and where resuscitation was unsuccessful—you know, that's consistent with my interpretation of what happened," he said.

The trial covered questions at the edge of scientific knowledge, and the material was dense and technical. For months, in discussions of the supposed air embolisms, witnesses tried to pinpoint the precise shade of skin discoloration of some of the babies. In Myers's cross-examinations, he noted that witnesses' memories of the rashes had changed, becoming more specific and florid in the years since the deaths. But this debate seemed to distract from a more relevant objection: the concern with skin discoloration arose from the 1989 paper. An author of the paper, Shoo Lee, one of the most prominent neonatologists in Canada, has since reviewed summaries of each pattern of skin discoloration in the Letby case and said that none of the rashes were characteristic of air embolism. He also said that air embolism should never be a diagnosis that a doctor lands on just because other causes of sudden collapse have been ruled out: "That would be very wrong—that's a fundamental mistake of medicine."

Several months into the trial, Richard Gill, an emeritus professor of mathematics at Leiden University, in the Netherlands, began writing online about his concerns regarding the case. Gill was one of the authors of the Royal Statistical Society report, and in 2006 he had testified before a committee tasked with determining whether to reopen the case of Lucia de Berk. England has strict contempt-of-court laws that prevent the publication of any material that could prejudice legal proceedings. Gill posted a link to a Web site, created by Sarrita Adams, a scientific consultant in California, that detailed flaws in the prosecution's medical evidence. In July, a detective with the Cheshire police sent letters to Gill and Adams ordering them to stop writing about the case. "The publication of this material puts you at risk of 'serious consequences' (which include a sentence of imprisonment)," the letters said. "If you come within the jurisdiction of the court, you may be liable to arrest."

Letby is housed in a privately run prison west of London, the largest correctional facility for women in Europe. Letters to prisoners are screened, and I don't know if several letters that I sent ever reached her. One of her lawyers, Richard Thomas, who has represented her since early in the case, said that he would tell Letby that I had been in touch with him, but he ignored my request to share a message with her, instead reminding me of the contempt-of-court order. He told me, "I cannot give any comment on why you cannot communicate" with Letby. Lawyers in England can be sanctioned for making remarks that would undermine confidence in the judicial system. I sent Myers, Letby's barrister, several messages in the course of nine months, and he always responded with some version of an apology—"the brevity of this response is not intended to be rude in any way"—before saying that he could not talk to me.

Michael Hall, the defense expert, had expected to testify at the trial—he was prepared to point to flaws in the prosecution's theory of air embolism and to undetected signs of illness in the babies—but he was never called. He was troubled that the trial largely excluded evidence about the treatment of the babies' mothers; their medical care is inextricably linked to the health of their babies. In the past ten years, the U.K. has had four highly publicized maternity scandals, in which failures of care and supervision led to a large number of newborn deaths. A report about East Kent Hospitals, which found that forty-five babies might have lived if their treatment had been better, identified a "crucial truth about maternity and neonatal services": "So much hangs on what happens in the minority of cases where things start to go wrong, because problems can very rapidly escalate to a devastatingly bad outcome." The report warned, "It is too late to pretend that this is just another one-off, isolated failure, a freak event that '*will never happen again*.'"

Hall thought about asking Letby's lawyers why he had not been called to testify, but anything they said would be confidential, so he decided that he'd rather not know. He wondered if his testimony was seen as too much of a risk: "One of the questions they would have asked me is 'Why did this baby die?' And I would have had to say, 'I'm not sure. I don't know.' That's not to say that therefore the baby died of air embolism. Just because we don't have an explanation doesn't mean we are going to make one up." The fact that the jury never heard another side "keeps me awake at night," Hall told me.

After the prosecution finished presenting its case, Letby's defense team submitted a motion arguing that the medical evidence about air embolism was so unreliable that there was "no case to answer" and the charges should be dismissed. Though the motion was rejected, perhaps it had seemed that

the prosecution's case was so weak that defense experts weren't necessary. The only witnesses Myers called were the hospital's plumber, who spoke about unsanitary conditions, and Letby, who testified for fourteen days.

She said she felt that there were systemic failures at the hospital, but that some of the senior pediatricians had "apportioned blame on to me." Johnson, the prosecutor, pushed her to come up with her own explanation for each baby's deterioration. Yet she wasn't qualified to provide them. "In general, I don't think a lot of the babies were cared for on the unit properly," she offered. "I'm not a medical professional to know exactly what should and shouldn't have happened with those babies."

"Do you agree that if certain combinations of these children were attacked then unless there was more than one person attacking them, you have to be the attacker?" Johnson asked at one point.

"No."

"You don't agree?"

"No. I've not attacked any children."

Johnson continued, "But if the jury conclude that a certain combination of children were actually attacked by someone, then the shift pattern gives us the answer as to who the attacker was, doesn't it?"

"No, I don't agree."

"You don't agree. Why don't you agree?"

"Because just because I was on shift doesn't mean that I have done anything."

"I'll use numbers, all right? I won't refer to specific cases. Let's say if baby 5, 8, 10 and 12 were all attacked, if the jury look at the medical evidence and say they were all attacked by someone, and you're the only common feature, it would have to be, wouldn't it, that you're the attacker?"

"That's for them to decide."

"Well, of course it is, of course it is. But as a principle, do you agree with that?"

"No, I don't feel I can answer that."

After a few days of cross-examination, Letby seemed to shut down; she started frequently giving one-word answers, almost whispering. "I'm finding it quite hard to concentrate," she said.

Johnson repeatedly accused her of lying. "You are a very calculating woman, aren't you, Lucy Letby?" he said.

"No," she replied.

He asked, "The reason you tell lies is to try to get sympathy from people, isn't it?"

"No."

"You try to get attention from people, don't you?"

"No."

"In killing these children, you got quite a lot of attention, didn't you?"

"I didn't kill the children."

Toward the end of the trial, the court received an e-mail from someone who claimed to have overheard one of the jurors at a café saying that jurors had "already made up their minds about her case from the start." Goss reviewed the complaint but ultimately allowed the juror to continue serving.

He instructed the twelve members of the jury that they could find Letby guilty even if they weren't "sure of the precise harmful act" she'd committed. In one case, for instance, Evans had proposed that a baby had died of excessive air in her stomach from her nasogastric tube, and then, when it emerged that she might not have had a nasogastric tube, he proposed that she may have been smothered.

The jury deliberated for thirteen days but could not reach a unanimous decision. In early August, one juror dropped out. A few days later, Goss told the jury that he would accept a 10–1 majority verdict. Ten days later, it was announced that the jury had found Letby guilty of fourteen charges. The two insulin cases and one of the triplet charges were unanimous; the rest

were majority verdicts. When the first set of verdicts was read, Letby sobbed. After the second set, her mother cried out, "You can't be serious!" Letby was acquitted of two of the attempted-murder charges. There were also six attempted-murder charges in which the jury could not decide on a verdict.

Within a week, the Cheshire police announced that they had made an hour-long documentary film about the case with "exclusive access to the investigation team," produced by its communications department. Fourteen members of Operation Hummingbird spoke about the investigation, accompanied by an emotional soundtrack. A few days later, the *Times* of London reported that a major British production company, competing against at least six studios, had won access to the police and the prosecutors to make a documentary, which potentially would be distributed by Netflix. Soon afterward, the Cheshire police revealed that they had launched an investigation into whether the Countess was guilty of "corporate manslaughter." The police also said that they were reviewing the records of four thousand babies who had been treated on units where Letby had worked in her career, to see if she had harmed other children.

The public conversation about the case seemed to treat details about poor care on the unit as if they were irrelevant. In his closing statement, Johnson had accused the defense of "gaslighting" the jury by suggesting that the problem was the hospital, not Letby. Defending himself against the accusation, Myers told the jury, "It's important I make it plain that in no way is this case about the N.H.S. in general." He assured the jury, "We all feel strongly about the N.H.S. and we are protective of it." It seemed easier to accept the idea of a sadistic "angel of death" than to look squarely at the fact that families who had trusted the N.H.S. had been betrayed, their faith misplaced.

Since the verdicts, there has been almost no room for critical reflection. At the end of September, a little more than a month after the trial ended, the prosecution announced that it would retry Letby on one of the attempted-murder charges, and a new round of reporting restrictions was promptly put in place. The contempt-of-court rules are intended to preserve the integrity of the legal proceedings, but they also have the effect of suppressing commentary that questions the state's decisions. In October, *The BMJ*, the country's leading medical journal, published a comment from a retired British doctor cautioning against a "fixed view of certainty that justice has been done." In light of the new reporting restrictions, the journal removed the com-

ment from its Web site, "for legal reasons." At least six other editorials and comments, which did not question Letby's guilt, remain on the site.

Letby has applied to appeal her conviction, and she is waiting for three judges on the Court of Appeal to decide whether to allow her to proceed. If her application is denied, it will mark the end of her appeals process.

Her retrial in June concerns a baby girl whose breathing tube came out of place. She had been born at the Countess at twenty-five weeks, which is younger than the infants the hospital was supposed to treat. In a TV interview that aired after the verdict but before the retrial was announced, Jayaram, the head of the pediatric ward, said that he had seen Letby next to the baby as the child's oxygen levels were dropping. "The only possibility was that that tube had to have been dislodged deliberately," he said. "She was just standing there." He recalled, "That is a night that is etched on my memory and will be in my nightmares forever."

"Sorry my story ended up just being me describing a TV show I watched recently."

• •

Brearey, the head of the neonatal unit, told me that after Letby's first arrest, in 2018, a "significant cohort of nurses felt that she had done nothing wrong." But, in the past six years, many of them have retired or left. In an interview with a TV news program shortly after the verdict, Karen Rees, the former head of nursing for urgent care, seemed to be struggling to modify her beliefs. She routinely met with Letby in the two years after she was removed from the unit. "If I think back to all the times when I have seen her really, really upset—I wouldn't say hysterical but really upset—then I would think that . . ." She paused. The camera was focussed on her shirt, her face intentionally obscured. "How can somebody continually present themselves in that way on a near-weekly basis for two years?" Her voice trembled. "I find that really difficult, and I think, Oh, my gosh, would she have been that good at acting?"

Brearey told me that only one or two nurses still "can't fully come to terms" with Letby's guilt. The ward remains a Level I unit, accepting only babies older than thirty-two weeks, and it has added more consultants to its staff. The mortality rate is no longer high. The hospital has, however, seen a spike in adverse events on the maternity unit. During an eight-month period in 2021, five mothers had unplanned hysterectomies after losing more than two litres of blood. Following a whistle-blower complaint, an inspection by the U.K.'s Care Quality Commission warned that the unit was not keeping "women safe from avoidable harm." The commission discovered twenty-one incidents in which thirteen patients had been endangered, and it determined that in many cases the hospital had not sufficiently investigated the circumstances.

It was another cluster of unexpected, catastrophic events. But this time the story told about the events was much less colorful. The commission blamed a combination of factors that had been present in many of the previous maternity scandals, including staff and equipment shortages, a lack of training, a failure to follow national guidelines, poor recordkeeping, and a culture in which staff felt unsupported. It went unstated, but one can assume that there was another factor, too: a tragic string of bad luck.

Throughout the year of the deaths, Letby had occasionally reflected on the nature of chance, texting friends that she wanted to imagine there was a "reason for everything," but it also felt like the "luck of [the] draw." After the first three deaths, she wrote to Margaret, her mentor, "Sometimes I think how do such sick babies get through and others just die so suddenly and unexpectedly?"

"We just don't have magic wands," Margaret responded. "It's important to remember that a death isn't a fail." She added, "You're an excellent nurse, Lucy, don't forget it."

"I know and I don't feel it's a failure," Letby responded, "more that it's just very sad to know what families go through." ♦

THE INSTIGATOR

How Miranda July starts again.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

Miranda July is good at plot. Stories will come to her fully formed, like a gift from the gods; all she has to do is unwrap them. In her Los Angeles office, a little house where she keeps more than three decades' worth of papers, photographs, awards, cassette tapes, and costumes, is a notebook that she filled in a single feverish train ride with the bones of her first feature film, "Me and You and Everyone We Know" (2005). Something similar happened with her first novel, "The First Bad Man" (2015), and with her latest movie, "Kajillionaire" (2020): a sudden vision, a pause to ponder, then a rush to get it all down. July is a director, a performer, and an artist who likes to work in media that do not seem to be media at all until she shows up to exploit their latent possibilities. She has opened an interfaith charity shop in a fancy London department store and created an app that allows strangers to deliver intimate messages and narrated the inner monologues of models during an Hermès fashion show. But she thinks of herself, first and foremost, as a writer. Sometimes, on a film set, an actor will improvise a line and she will have to tell him, No, please stick to the script. She knows what she means to say.

In the fall of 2017, July started to feel a second novel coming on. This time, though, she wanted to do things differently, to embrace the mystery of not knowing—what the writer Grace Paley called "the open destiny of life"—for as long as she could. "I felt like there was a way in which one's anxiety is very calmed by having a plot," she told me recently. "You feel safe. And there's a way in which working like that can limit things if you have what you think of as a good idea too early."

She began recording notes on her laptop. "A mom dealing with trauma. Sexism and marriage. All the women struggling with all the good men," the first one read. A few months later: "A sort of Lord of the Rings story of marriage and motherhood and middle age." The notes accumulated, until, eventually, there were nearly two thousand of them. The novel that resulted, "All Fours," will be published this month, by Riverhead.

In the past, July's protagonists have been outsiders, tenderhearted weirdos who flaunt their glittering fictionality like a piece of costume jewelry. Old Dolio, the heroine of "Kajillionaire," played by Evan Rachel Wood, is a small-time scammer who lives in an office building with her emotionally repressive parents. Cheryl Glickman, the narrator of "The First Bad Man," is a reclusive employee of a women's self-defense nonprofit who ends up in an erotically explosive relationship with her bosses' daughter. "All Fours" breaks with this tradition. The novel's narrator is an unnamed forty-five-year-old in L.A. with a mellow music-producer husband, Harris, and a sweet, precocious seven-year-old, Sam. She is a "semi-famous" artist and writer, a status that she is at once proud of and defensive about. She is a recognizable member of Miranda July's world. She is, in fact, a lot like Miranda July.

The novel starts with a road trip. The narrator has come into some unexpected cash: a whiskey company has licensed a sentence she once wrote, paying her twenty thousand dollars to use it in an advertisement. ("It was a sentence about hand jobs but out of context it could also apply to whiskey," she explains.) Her best friend, a sculptor named Jordi, advises her to spend the money on beauty, so she decides to drive to New York and luxuriate at the Carlyle Hotel. Less than an hour after setting off, she stops for gas in a nondescript town called Monrovia. A man in his early thirties cleans her windshield. He's handsome, friendly. They chat. His name is Davey. He's a Hertz employee; his wife, Claire, works at an interior-decorating company. They're saving up a nest egg, Davey tells her—twenty thousand dollars.

The narrator checks into the Excelsior, a depressing motel nearby. She tells Harris that she's still driving. What is she doing? "Who really knows why anyone does anything?" she asks, reasonably. "Who made the stars? Why is there life on Earth?"

The next day, she cancels her stay at the Carlyle. Then she calls Claire and hires her to renovate the room at the Excelsior. She wants to make it sumptuous, sublime, inspired by a Parisian hotel whose opulence once made her weep. She is willing to pay for the best of everything: wallpaper, carpet, tile, drapes. They agree on a fee. You can guess what it is. Within days, she and Davey have succumbed to the kind of magnetic, earth-shattering attraction that makes men compromise their gubernatorial careers and women join cults. The room at the Excelsior becomes their love nest, of a kind—Davey, an honorable soul, will not break his wedding vows by consummating their passion—but a terrible deadline looms. The narrator's putative road trip must come to an end. What will happen when she returns home to face her life?

"If a book is really working, you're in a narrow channel, and the water is going really fast," the writer George Saunders, a friend of July's, told me. That is what reading "All Fours" is like: being swept, paddleless, down a coursing river, submitting to the thrill of the rapids. July's narrator is ecstatically trapped by a plot that she has no choice but to set in motion, even as it upends her life. July knows how this feels. When a character serves as an alter ego for her author, it is natural to wonder if the things that befall her are taken from reality. But what of the reverse? When you mold an avatar in your own image, then send her on

July's new novel, "All Fours," is a study of sex, marriage, and middle age that prompted its author to change her life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE OPIE

bold and outrageous adventures, you may find that you have opened a portal from the invented world into the real one—that what you have dared to imagine on the page may enlarge your imagination for what can happen beyond it.

In early December, I knocked on the front door of July's little house. No one answered. I went in. The main room, furnished with a long white table and a pair of fraying armchairs upholstered in a lemon-tree print, was lined with bookshelves. A long, dark braid that looked like it might have been scalped from Marina Abramović hung in a hairnet by a doorway. The doorway was familiar to me. While July was working on "All Fours," she relieved the tedium of writing by dancing there, sensuously writhing in various costumes or states of undress. Sometimes she filmed herself and put the videos on Instagram, surfacing from her private labors to flirt with the world.

July has rented the house since 2003, when she moved from Portland, Oregon, to Los Angeles before making "Me and You and Everyone We Know." Shortly after the film's première, she and the writer-director Mike Mills began dating; she spent every night at his place in Silver Lake but kept all of her things at hers. Every few days, she would go back for a change of clothes and stumble into what felt like a time capsule. The kitchen was still stocked with beans and rice. The condoms from a previous boyfriend were still in the bathroom drawer. Nothing had changed, except her.

July kept the beans, threw out the condoms, and moved in with Mills. They married in 2009, and had a child, Hopper. She commuted daily to the little house to work, a fifteen-minute walk. But after she sold "All Fours," in 2019, on the strength of a freewheeling seven-page proposal, she began to worry. How would she access the unencumbered focus that novel-writing demands? A book is like a child; it wants your full attention all the time. July's solution was to spend one night a week—Wednesdays—back at her house. Released from the disruption of domestic obligations, she could write as soon as she woke.

July's voice entered the room, followed by the rest of her. In the flesh, she does not seem like a person inclined to break into sensuous dance. She is reflective, deliberate, serious to the point of grave, though emotion can bring her, in a flash, to tears. "She's very precise in the way she speaks and in the way she thinks and the way she dresses," the writer Sheila Heti, who is close with July, told me. Today, she was wearing gray Wranglers with a navy-blue Nike windbreaker debonairly draped over a ribbed white turtleneck: haute greaser.

"This is a bit in transition," July said, gesturing at the room. She had been reorganizing. On the floor was a collage of photographs that she was tinkering with in preparation for an upcoming exhibition of her work, which would be presented by Fondazione Prada in Milan. As we went to sit down, she calmly let me know that I had stepped on it.

July opened her laptop to show me more of the notes for "All Fours." Many had to do with aging. In two months, she would turn fifty; the fact of passing fully and finally out of youth had been one of the novel's instigating themes. July had felt herself beginning to cross that frontier when she was shooting "Kajillionaire." "I was around these women younger than me, and then Debra Winger," she said. "There were all kinds of things that I was watching her go through that I could relate to, more than I could to the younger women." Winger played Old Dolio's severe, aggressively unmaternal mother, and July asked that she wear no makeup: not an easy request for any actress, let alone one in her sixties who had once been celebrated for her looks. "I had never been around someone who was a sex symbol in her youth, like a literal, mainstream sex symbol," July told me. "I was kind of, like, 'I think maybe I wasn't hot enough to have the loss be something that I have to work so hard to process.'"

Still, the idea of aging as a loss—of beauty, of femininity, of the known self itself—had stuck. In "All Fours," the narrator has never given serious thought to getting older until she has a routine gynecology appointment and is prescribed estradiol, an estrogen cream. This is ironic: preoccupied with her longing for Davey, she had explained her moodiness to Harris by telling him that she was menopausal. But that had been inconceivable, a bluff. Now her doctor tells her that she is indeed in perimenopause. The symptoms listed by WebMD include "reduced libido, or sex drive." She finds a chart of sex hormones that shows men's testosterone comfortably cruising near the same levels over a lifetime; women's estrogen looks like a camel's hump, crashing at fifty. "We're about to fall off a cliff," she tells Jordi, in a panic. Davey has reawakened her dormant carnal desire, her ecstatic connection to her own body, just in time for her to lose it forever.

July read a note from 2018: "Thinking about what aging means for the trans child, the need for hormones and blockers." (Hopper is nonbinary, as is Sam, the narrator's kid.) "And how the physical changes of middle age/old age out anyone who is living as more feminine than they were born, which most women do. We find that makeup and cute clothes don't work anymore." The note went on:

> It's not that one wants to be masculine, but the femininity we were instructed in was actually *youth*. It peters out. For any kind of woman, especially a trans woman, but all of us. So you find yourself having to invent a new kind of femininity. From thin air. Not based on anything you've seen—or if you've seen it it's so rare as to be part of an exquisite and obscure collection.

I told July that this reminded me of the recent hoopla when Pamela Anderson chose to go makeup-free at Paris Fashion Week. People acted as if they had never seen an older woman's naked face before.

"Yeah," July said. "And I did just watch all of 'The Golden Bachelor.'" Not usually a viewer of reality TV, she had been fascinated by the self-presentation of the contestants, older women who were competing for a shot at love. "How many times do we have to hear 'It's not over! You get a second chance at life!'? I was, like, Yeah, it's also not over when you're eighty! There's the miracle of the second chance—or eighth! Or ninth!"

After her gynecology appointment, the "All Fours" narrator begins to spiral. She feels that she is on the verge of a

kind of death. Davey has long ago returned to Claire and limited contact, but she decides that she must have him at any cost. She commits to a rigorous weight-training program. Her triceps start to tighten, her butt to lift. Since leaving Monrovia, she has booked her room at the Excelsior one night a week—Wednesdays—under the pretext of working on an art project. Now she attempts to summon her would-be lover by performing a lewd, longing mating dance in front of the motel and posting it to Instagram. Davey doesn't see the video, but Harris does. The previous issues in their marriage were one-sided, the narrator's secret, but the dance plunges them into a shared crisis that they have no choice but to confront together.

July's own Wednesday nights led to a comparable rupture. "It was one of those things that seemed to break a cardinal rule of being a mom and a family," she told me. "You release your death grip on the structure as it was described to you, and suddenly each part of it you can look at." The more she looked, the less sense the structure made.

By the time her novel was finished, so was July's romantic relationship with Mills. Now they both had girlfriends, and were "nesting" at Mills's house, alternating four-night stretches there with Hopper. But July needed a place of her own—and, as if by magic, one had appeared only a couple of weeks before my visit. Behind her house was another of the same size, owned by the same landlord. Its longtime tenant had just departed, leaving it in rough shape. "I haven't made a home, really, since I was in my twenties, but I've made three feature films since then," July told me. She had deliberated, then signed the lease.

We went through what had just become July's unshared yard and up a set of stairs to the other house. The kitchen was a mess of peeling linoleum and dour, dark cabinetry. A porch off the living room had been closed in, its walls covered with seedy wood panelling that seemed to have been untouched since the seventies.

But the light was beautiful, particularly in Hopper's future room. July was excited about the peach-tiled bathroom, which had an ancient, hazardous-looking heater coiled in the ceiling. Her own bedroom had barely enough room for a queen-size bed. July told me that she planned to treat the renovation as an art project. She wouldn't ask her landlord for permission; she would be her own neighbor, her artistic and domestic lives arranged side by side. "Now every day will be Wednesday," she said.

On one of July's shelves is a collection of books by Richard Grossinger, with titles such as "Embryos, Galaxies, and Sentient Beings," "Dark Pool of Light Volume II: Consciousness in Psychospiritual and Psychic Ranges," and "2013: Raising the Earth to the Next Vibration." Grossinger is July's father. He and her mother, Lindy Hough, met as undergraduates, and when July was born, in 1974, so was North Atlantic Books, their publishing company. When July was three and her brother, Robin, was eight, they moved from Vermont to Berkeley.

July's parents were joined in graphomania. "Writing was not a voluntary activity for them," Robin told me. "It wasn't even a calling. It was a compulsion." Hough wrote poetry and fiction. Grossinger wrote nonfiction on every topic under the sun, and many beyond it; his interests ranged from baseball to Tai Chi, ecology, bodywork, and astronomy. North Atlantic was run out of their house, and the life of the family was indistinguishable from that of the business. July and her brother served as unpaid interns of a kind, sorting through stock in the basement, trekking to the post office to mail orders in a wacky assortment of boxes. July's parents didn't have a permit to operate out of a residential property, so when a delivery truck would arrive, Robin told me, the whole family would rush to get the books inside before the neighbors noticed. "It definitely was idiosyncratic—even for Berkeley," he added.

July finds much to admire in her upbringing. "The fact that my parents are both writers, but not famous or successful, made me understand that this was something worth doing day in, day out," she told me. "They had their audience, and it was enough." Pride, however, was not unmixed with embarrassment. One of the press's best-sellers was "The Monuments of Mars," a treatise on alien civilization by the conspiracy theorist Richard C. Hoagland. At the grocery store, July saw an issue of the *National Enquirer* devoted to the same subject. "I knew we were in that territory somehow," she said. "It was a fine line, and we just went over it."

July has drawn on this dynamic throughout her work, most notably in "Kajillionaire." In the early days of the press, the Grossinger-Hough family was awash in financial anxiety, and so, in the film, is Old Dolio's. Yet it doesn't

"You don't seem pleased to have a former royal as a neighbor."

occur to her to challenge her parents' judgment, or their suspicion of the outside world, even when it is obvious that their scamming techniques leave much to be desired. They divide their paltry loot three ways, like business partners. "I always thought it was insulting to treat you like a child," Old Dolio's father, played by Richard Jenkins, tells her. "It just always seemed so insincere." Both of July's parents appear, in fictionalized form, in "All Fours." The narrator's father, who believes that his soul has been replaced by that of an impostor, meditates for hours a day and is in the grips of something he calls "the deathfield," a state that seems to correspond to depression.

As a kid, July liked to record one-sided conversations on cassette tapes, leaving pauses so that she could play them back and chat with herself. In high school, she found her voice on the page with *Snarla*, a feminist zine that she made with her best friend, Johanna Fateman, who went on to become a writer and a founding member of the band Le Tigre. July created a recurring series of interviews with different parts of herself—her confidence, her insecurity. Fateman depicted the pair as fictional characters, Ida and July, the name that Miranda eventually took as her own.

Snarla turned out to be July's ticket out into the world. She and Fateman distributed copies at 924 Gilman Street, an all-ages punk club in Berkeley, where the zine got the attention of riot-grrrl bands from the Pacific Northwest who saw in July a kindred spirit. "Her hair was bleached white, like the top of a Q-tip, and she used to wear her tights over her shoes, so she just had this otherworldly quality to her," Carrie Brownstein, of the band Sleater-Kinney, who met July when they were both nineteen, told me. After graduating, July enrolled at U.C. Santa Cruz, but school was never her thing. She dropped out after two years and moved to Portland, the heart of the scene.

By then, July knew that she wanted to make films. She had already written and directed a play, "The Lifers," based on a correspondence that she had initiated with a thirty-eight-year-old inmate in Arizona whose name she had found on a list of prison pen pals in the back of a magazine. July had been fascinated by incarceration since she was small—at bedtime, her father read her Norman Mailer's "The Executioner's Song"—and the inmate, serving a life sentence for murder, had no contact with anyone else on the outside. "I would write about my daily life, like, 'I'm taking driving lessons,'" July recalled. "And he would write about his: 'There was a riot.'" She sent him audio letters and blank cassettes, which he would return filled with his voice.

July staged "The Lifers" at Gilman Street with a pair of actors recruited through ads in the *East Bay Express;* rehearsals were held in her parents' attic. July is a perfectionist, prone to both meticulous planning and insomniac anxiety. The night before the play's début, she panicked and walked across town to a friend's house, then, too shy to wake his family, went home and lay down under a parked car. "I used to worry much more about madness," she said. Her father's mother, brother, and sister all died by suicide, a legacy that she confronts in "All Fours." The deathfield didn't emerge from nowhere.

"All Fours" is not the first time that July has described the cliff—that precipice over which another era of life unfathomably looms. It's there, too, in "The Future," her 2011 film, in which

RADISHES

Smoke and ash of November.
A landscape of sediment and char,
lead and gold leaf, mutilated sod
racing on its planetary camber.
On a kitchen table's crude altar
a bowl of radishes is offered

with a dish of salt for dipping whole.
That's how my father would eat them.
My mother sliced them thin.
Theirs was no house in a fairy tale.
Yet the knife that trimmed the stem
and scraped the blemished skin

would halt at her intrepid thumb.
Radishes of rosy cheeks, of snow,
peppery radishes of yesteryear,
which made my tongue go numb,
why are you so much milder now?
You don't set the mouth on fire.

Did something in your cultivation change,
or does sensation wane with age?
In a French film, I saw two friends
spread butter on radish halves; strange,
I thought, but now it's all the rage
to sauté them. Their trailing ends

clog my drain-stopper. Best is raw:
it's "war" backward, like a spell
grown in the cold ground, color
of rose and snow—good to gnaw
a vegetable so filial and feral
late in the year, when the knife is duller.

—Ange Mlinko

she plays Sophie, a woman in her thirties who is stuck, along with her boyfriend, in a state of perma-immaturity, afraid to commit to anything—a career, a cat, each other—that would signal the end of youth and all its possibilities. "I've always taken each stage really hard, like, no cool whatsoever," July told me. As a newly minted teen-ager, she was astonished to return from summer break and discover that a friend had sprouted boobs, and even more astonished when she asked to touch them and was angrily rebuffed. "I don't know why we're all acting like professionals at this," she remembers thinking. "We're amateurs. We know nothing."

Amateurism—ignorance of convention as a kind of fruitful innocence—is an important creative conceit for July. When she got to Portland, she created an underground distribution network, eventually called Joanie 4 Jackie, for short films made by women. For five dollars, any woman could send her movie to a P.O. box that July had rented and receive a tape of ten "lady-made" films in return. July spread the word by giving pamphlets to bands on tour, and by contacting teen-girl magazines. "She's already getting a steady inflow of films about everything from dreams to breasts, but says, 'It doesn't have to be arty or punk, just real,'" *Sassy* reported. By the time July ended the project, ten years later, she had distributed two hundred different shorts.

Part of what July was looking for was a community. At Santa Cruz, she had taken a filmmaking class and been turned off by the machismo that clung to the craft. "It was mostly guys, and every short they made would have a gun in it," she said. Joanie 4 Jackie was a way of translating the democratic ethos of the riot-grrrl movement to the hierarchical male movie world. July hadn't yet made a movie herself, but everything was training. Her first romantic experience, in high school, had been with a twenty-seven-year-old male graduate student. "I grew my feminist consciousness over the course of that relationship," she told me. "I drove us up into the hills to a cliff and made him go down on me. And when he came up, I broke up with him. Not that I even enjoyed that. It just seemed like a good visual."

In Portland, she found real love with a woman who worked at RadioShack; July nicknamed her Radio. "I'd never seen a butch girl," she told me. "And then I was, like, '*Oh*. This is the complete package.' In that case, complete with no ability to communicate." The couple formed a band with July's roommate; July was devastated when Radio dumped her for their bandmate. She had already booked a West Coast tour, so she called each venue to announce that another act would be opening: "It's called Miranda July."

July had been experimenting with writing short scripts for herself, playing around with voices, imagining the kinds of characters they might belong to. Those were the pieces—abstract, ominous, wantonly freaky—that she began performing, in front of audiences who expected to hear music. "I was in awe of it, but I think there was some skepticism," Brownstein told me. To support herself, July worked odd jobs—at a Goodwill, a café, then a peepshow—and made a brief, brutal foray into sex work. Her narratives grew more complex, her stagecraft more ambitious: catwalks, screens, projected backdrops that she controlled with a clicker in her hand.

Finally, she felt ready to pick up a camera. In her first film, "Atlanta," a ten-minute short from 1996, July played both a twelve-year-old swimmer competing in the Olympics and her domineering mother. In her second, "The Amateurist," she again played two roles: an "amateur" and the stolid, ingratiating "professional" who monitors her via video surveillance. The amateur wraps herself in a fur coat, strips down to her underwear, dances, gives the professional the finger; the professional interprets this behavior according to a baffling numerical system that seems as sinister as it is inscrutable.

After July had made six shorts, she was accepted, on her third try, into Sundance's incubator for first-time feature filmmakers. "I at that time was very punk," July told me. "I had never gotten feedback or teaching on anything. So I applied, but with a real chip on my shoulder." The film that she was developing—"Me and You and Everyone We Know"—is both a tender and a surprisingly steely treatise on human connection. Richard, a divorced shoe salesman, craves love but shrinks from it. His elder son is bullied and, in a sublime twist, adopted as a sexual guinea pig by two classmates who also flirt with a pervy middle-aged man who happens to be Richard's colleague; his younger son finds affection with an adult stranger in an online chat room. Meanwhile, Richard is pursued by Christine, an openhearted performance artist whose earnestness excites and frightens him.

At Sundance, July learned how to kill her darlings and emerge the stronger for it. (A lesbian story line got axed; too many subplots.) But there were certain compromises that she wasn't willing to make. "It was there that the pressure to cast stars began," she told me. "People were, like, 'Who are you thinking of casting for that lead? Maggie Gyllenhaal?' And I would say, 'Well, I'm thinking I'm going to play it myself.'"

The narrator of "All Fours" is beloved by many, unknown to most. She feels that the world underestimates the scope of her achievement, her ambition, her power. Her admirers are "not the kind famous men had, not a young woman eager to suck the wisdom out of my dick," she thinks. "My fame neutered me."

When "Me and You and Everyone We Know" débuted at Sundance, in 2005, July was shot overnight into the kind of celebrity that most indie auteurs can only dream of. One minute, she had been making experimental works that played to niche audiences. The next, she was collecting a Special Jury prize at Sundance, and, a few months later, the Caméra d'Or at Cannes. Around the world, people were tattooing themselves with the))<>((symbol, which the younger son in the film invents to signify the greatest act of love and eros he can imagine: pooping back and forth forever with the object of his affection.

As July became a recognizable figure—that pouf of curls, those ethereal blue eyes—she began to realize that the persona the public had assigned her didn't match the person she knew herself to be. She had cast herself as Christine, but the performance had worked too well; actor and role were now conflated. "To me, it couldn't be more obvious," she told me. "Like, Wow, I made this whole movie! I wrote it. I star in it. I directed it. It's the hardest thing

I've ever done." But, she went on, "the culture itself seemed like a sieve that kept that out, and all that came through were the clothes and the character I played, who was quite vulnerable, and would not have been able to make a movie." When people recognized July, they would ask to give her a hug, "like I was a lost forlorn little girl or something." "Me and You" looked head on at prickly and taboo topics—Agnès Varda's film "Kung-Fu Master!," about a middle-aged woman's affair with a fourteen-year-old boy, had served as a major inspiration—yet July felt "declawed" by popular perception. "I don't relate to this woman," she remembers thinking. "And now I'm stuck as her, and everything I do is *cute*."

The charge was hard to shake, and not just because of "Me and You." July's first book, the short-story collection "No One Belongs Here More Than You" (2007), featured a cast of cheerful eccentrics who confess their outré foibles and kinky yearnings with guileless sincerity. "The Future" was narrated by a talking cat, voiced by July; in one climactic scene, the boyfriend, played by Hamish Linklater, stops time and converses with the moon. Meanwhile, July was becoming known for digital experiments like "Learning to Love You More," a Web site that she ran for seven years with the artist Harrell Fletcher which issued weekly prompts—"describe what to do with your body when you die," "write the phone call you wish you could have"—that blurred the line between art and life. *The Onion* ran an article, "Miranda July Called Before Congress to Explain Exactly What Her Whole Thing Is," that encapsulated the prevailing attitude.

Back at July's table, as we went through her notes for "All Fours," the question of the book's style kept coming up. "Giving myself permission to write straight," one note said. "I'm so tired of the ways I've been clever and funny and strange," another began.

I asked July what she meant by writing "straight."

"I got so used to making a character that is weird enough and unreliable enough that she can say things that are really not O.K., and do things that are really not O.K., and everyone will laugh, but part of them will resonate with it, like, 'Oh, God, I'm kind of like that,'" she said.

It wasn't until the end of "The First Bad Man" that July felt able to write in a more direct way, to shrug off the cloak of the flagrantly fictional. The writing of that book had been interrupted by Hopper's birth; July and Mills had spent a frightening stretch in the NICU.

"I was in a very tripped-out place, very close to death and mortality," she told me. She ended up putting that experience directly into the novel, by giving it to Cheryl, the fastidious oddball whose peace is shattered by her bosses' unruly daughter. Touched by July's grief and love, the book matured, deepened; Cheryl, who began her fictional life as a singular, bizarre presence, ended it as an Everywoman. "Oh, that's a new thing," July thought. "Maybe you can just say it."

That effect—aliveness—is what July was after in "All Fours." "This won't ever be autofiction," she wrote in her book proposal, "because, for me, nothing takes flight without the alchemy of invention." But the invention would be pared back, tied to the real, in order to let in something else: risk. July had first tried this with "The Metal Bowl" (2017), a story that she published in this magazine, whose narrator is a prototype for the one in "All Fours." It's risky to let people see who you think you are, to expose your prejudices, your ego, your wild, embarrassing hopes and absurd failures. But that is what the book is about: giving up the cover of convenient fictions in order to own life's facts.

In February, I returned to Los Angeles to see how the home renovation was progressing. July has never owned much in the way of furnishings—her only contribution to the house with Mills was a set of linen curtains—and she had decided to procure everything secondhand. On my first visit, I had tagged along as she hunted through a vast salvage store in Filipinotown, where she hoped to discover a coral-colored toilet. A pair of bright-orange doors were labelled as the former property of J. Robert Oppenheimer; a hideous chandelier hailed from Rupert Murdoch's estate. Immune to the proprietor's friendly patter, July scanned the offerings and came away with a pair of flush-mount light fixtures from the thirties. The commode remained at large.

Now July stood in her kitchen with an artist friend, Chadwick Rantanen, who had come over to help with painting, and Nico B. Young, a soft-spoken twenty-four-year-old, also an artist, whom July was employing as her contractor. (They had been introduced by Young's girlfriend, a former nanny of Hopper's.) Young had totally reconfigured the room, lining it in custom cabinetry that he was in the process of covering with a glossy yellow resin that evoked Laffy Taffy.

An important decision regarding fridge placement had to be made. July directed Rantanen and Young to shift the appliance to the left, then back to

"You know, we have our little spats, but we don't argue about what to eat nearly as much as other couples."

the right. Every angle had to be considered: the approach from the sink, the clearance from the table, the view from the entryway. On the one hand, more functional space—Young's vote. On the other, the perfect symmetry that July craved.

"I am very drawn to having this sense of roominess," she conceded, as the men again nudged the fridge away from the countertop. "It's kind of like, 'Oh, look how luxurious!'"

"Whereas that shows a bit of restraint," Young said. "Look at all the space that you could have used." The difference could be measured in inches—no more than three.

"Yeah, I have money to *burn*," July joked.

Later, I asked July about the budget for her renovation. Twenty thousand dollars, she said—just like in "All Fours." It also came from the same source. A few years ago, Johnnie Walker had licensed a sentence from her story "The Moves," in which a daughter recalls her father teaching her how to get a woman off. Somewhere in the world is a whiskey ad emblazoned with the words "Don't wait to be sure. Move, move, move."

We were back in July's office, near a pile of books that she had consulted while writing "All Fours." There were classics such as "The Second Sex," plus "The Agony of Eros," by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, and "The Pocket Idiot's Guide to Bioidentical Hormones." At the top of the stack was a book called "A History of the Wife." I had noticed a photo from July's wedding day propped by her writing table: July, in a knee-length white dress and a short veil that had been designed for her by Rodarte, standing next to Mills in the woods, both of them beautiful and unsmiling.

In "The Metal Bowl," the narrator describes her marriage like this:

> We'd been tunnelling toward each other for years. It was hard work, but the assumption was that eventually our two tunnels would connect. We'd break through—Hallelujah! Clay-encrusted hands finally seizing each other!—and we would be together, really together, for the remaining time that we were alive. So long as we both dug as hard and as fast as we could, everything would work out. But, of course, neither of us knew for sure how the other person's digging was going. One of us might have been doggedly tunnelling toward the other person, while the other person was curling away in another direction.

The marriage in "All Fours" is marked by a similar sense of distance, for which the narrator feels responsible; next to the easygoing Harris, she is the complicated, cagey one. Like July, she underwent a traumatic delivery, and during the time that she and Harris shuttled back and forth to the hospital, visiting their fragile newborn, they operated as a single, soldered unit. Someday, she assumes, another crisis will shock them back together.

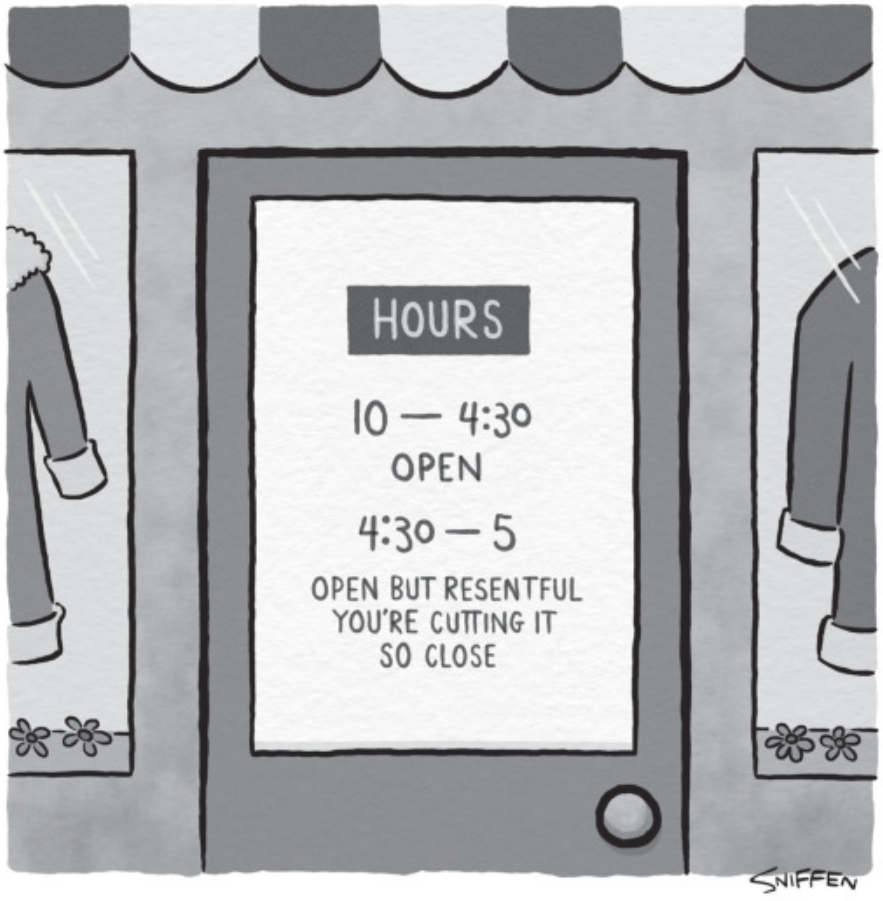
Instead, she is ambushed by desire. July is one of the great sex writers, even when what she is describing could not properly be called sex. To remain faithful to his wife, Davey is maddeningly chaste: no kissing, no genitals. He and the narrator dance and lie on the floor, their feet touching, but this is not enough. On one occasion, the narrator follows him into the bathroom: "I stuck my hand in the stream of his hot pee, catching an overflowing handful." Davey wants to return the intimacy, so she lets him push in her tampon. "I felt close to tears, some combination of shame, excitement, and an unexpected kind of sadness, as if this were coming after a lifetime of neglect," she tells us. This is icky, moving, and very funny: all the qualities of sex, save the pleasure.

When sex does enter the book, it comes like a sudden desert rain, unexpected and unstoppable. At one point, the narrator ends up in bed with Audra, the woman who initiated Davey into the arts of physical love. "Her skin was beginning to thin with age, like a banana's, but instead of being gross it felt incredible, velvety warm water," the narrator marvels. July, so free on the page, is positively prim when asked about such scenes. "I'm still a little in the phase where it's fine if you read the book, but I'll have to kill you afterward," she said. She went on, "I get that it's my own shame. I feel fairly at peace with my shame. It's what I have to work with." The part of her sitting with me, as the bright California light gently filtered into the room through white sheers, was separated by some interior screen from the private part of her that had described the narrator tussling with Audra's "big, soft tits" and "enormous ass," and the mystery had to be respected. July did own that she had been especially pleased with a line in which the narrator wonders if Audra was "vibrator-tuned, if this was a fool's errand." She giggled.

One function of sex in "All Fours" is to create a kind of inversion. The shock of eros forges intimacy between the narrator and a stranger, and, as a result, her former intimate becomes a stranger in turn. What reconnects her to Harris is, paradoxically, the process of breaking apart their union. July describes her separation from Mills, too, as a "transformation." To avoid feelings of competition and toe-stepping, they had always steered clear of each other's careers. But separating, July said, had been a high-stakes collaboration—like "carefully clipping the wires on a bomb."

I wondered what it would be like for July to give up the comfortable home she had shared with Mills. "It was a wonderful season in that house," July told me. But, lately, she had found herself longing to cross her yard at the end of the workday and lie down in her own small room. She wanted solitude, but not just that. Hopper would be there half the time, and she was focussed on making her house livable for a kid. July asked me if I had heard of "the repair," a concept that she had been taught when Hopper was small. "You fuck up, right?" she said. "You lose your temper. Or you do something even worse—something subtle, that you know wasn't quite right." She put on a musing-aloud kind of voice. " 'Gosh, what I did there, I felt a little scared! Did you see what I did? I lashed out at you. I'm so sorry I did that. I wonder what I could do next time.'" Messing up is inevitable. The lesson is what comes next.

The next month, July flew to Milan, where Fondazione Prada was hosting her exhibition in the heart of the city. Titled "New Society," the show functioned as a kind of retrospective, the first of July's career. When I arrived, the day before the opening, July and the show's



curator, Mia Locks, were bustling around, meeting with docents, posing for promotional photos. A crisis had just erupted involving "I'm the President, Baby" (2018), a work that July had made in concert with Oumarou Idrissa, an Uber driver she met when he transported her to an interview she conducted with Rihanna. The piece consists of four sets of jewel-toned velvet curtains that were originally linked to Idrissa's phone and bed, opening and closing according to when he slept, used the Uber app, went on Instagram, or contacted his family in Niger on WhatsApp. July had discovered that the curtains didn't hang quite right, and a fleet of Prada seamstresses had bundled them off to be hemmed.

This was July's second time making art with the Prada Group. In 2010, she was asked to make a film for "Women's Tales," an anthology of shorts commissioned by Miu Miu. July replied that she wanted to make a movie about an app that didn't exist—and that she wanted funding to create the app, too. The result was Somebody, a messaging service that went live in August, 2014, and lasted through October of the next year. Messages sent through Somebody were intercepted by a stranger nearby, who then used the app's geolocation tool to find the intended recipient and deliver the text verbally. The sender could select from a menu of actions to guide the performance: cry, laugh, shout, kiss. July is fascinated by collaboration; what is it like to be invited into contact with someone else, to change and be changed by another? By removing the artist from the equation and turning normal people, briefly, into actors playing the part of a stranger, Somebody was among her fullest realizations of this theme.

July in prep mode was alert, nervous, tired. By the following morning's press conference, though, she had fully assumed her role. Dressed in an A-line gray wool skirt, a red eyelet cardigan, and black pumps, she stood statue-still, hands clasped, while Locks gave introductory remarks that a translator rendered into Italian. When it was her turn to speak, she came alive.

"In these performances, it's a funny thing, because I have the power, and I'm onstage, and everyone's looking at me, but simultaneously I'm vulnerable," July told the scrum of journalists. She motioned toward the back of the room, where a video of "New Society," the performance that gave the show its name, was playing. In that piece, July asks her audience to create a new society together, complete with flag, currency, and national anthem. At one point, she leaves the theatre entirely. "Involving other people is scary," she said. "It's dangerous. It makes my heart skip a beat. . . . Probably that rush is a bit like the material I'm working with. It's like its own paint."

As July was peppered with more questions, I wandered up to the second floor of the show. There was the collage that I had stepped on, safely behind glass. A few months earlier, July had recirculated a prompt from "Learning to Love You More": "make an exhibition of the art in your parents' house." One end of the floor was devoted to the result, in which a young Milanese woman, Miriam Goi, displayed various knickknacks from her mother's home alongside museum-style wall text. The effect was charming, at once playfully nose-thumbing about "official" notions of art and ennobling of personal taste in all its peculiarity.

Growing up, July was made to feel that "some people are smart and special. And then there are regular people, and they're less interesting than us." July came to disagree, and her work is her proof. The writer Maggie Nelson told me that one of the things that make July so effective on the page is how simple and accessible her prose is. "The weirdest things happen—these kinds of very weird, glittery cloud spaces are conjured, so it's very avant-garde in that way. But I'm always impressed by the mystery of how you can do it with pretty plain language," Nelson said. "It feels like a stealth operation."

For all her populism, though, July has no interest in fully ceding control. Later that evening, clad in a pale diaphanous dress and Balenciaga heels, she greeted well-wishers near a new digital work that she had begun making while she was still finishing "All Fours." On Instagram, she had asked seven strangers to upload videos in response to prompts; then, using editing tools on her iPhone, July spliced

the videos together with ones that she had made in the dancing spot in her office. She called the piece "F.A.M.I.L.Y. (Falling Apart Meanwhile I Love You)."

I slowly circled the six big screens showing the work. On one, a man danced with a wheelchair as July crouched near him, encased in a pair of nude stockings. On another, a person veiled in a garbage bag was suspended upside down from the ceiling, like an insect hanging from a sac, while July wiggled around and then began to heave herself toward her partner: a disembodied tush hopping, frog-like, up the wall. The contact between July and her partners could seem loving. Kisses were exchanged; one body melted into another. But there was also a sense of detachment, rupture. Trying for connection is no guarantee of finding it. Here was a man washing himself in a shower, joined suddenly by July, but even as she pressed herself against him he carried on as if she wasn't there.

July celebrated her fiftieth birthday with her girlfriend, plus her friends Isabelle Albuquerque and Sheila Heti. After dinner, they decamped to her new house, sitting on a rust-red sectional that July was still trying to configure on a red Turkish rug. "You see how, if you squint your eyes, it's like baloney?" July said, of her emerging color scheme.

A few weeks earlier, I had spent an afternoon with July and Albuquerque. Tall and angular, her dark hair slicked into a Bowie back sweep, Albuquerque had burst into July's office, a bubbling hot spring next to July's still lake. "Oh, my *God!*" she screamed, when she saw the advance copy of "All Fours" that July had been saving for her. Like Jordi, Albuquerque is a sculptor; July modelled the character on her, and she is the book's dedicatee.

"I'm still kind of processing it," Albuquerque said, when I asked her how she felt about the depiction. "But I don't see it as just my alter ego. I feel part of a lineage." Many people define the eras of their lives by romantic relationships. July's are better understood as a sequence of all-consuming friendships that stretch back to grade school. Some have ended with bad breakups; most carry on, if at a lower heat. Heti told me that after she and July first spoke, twelve or thirteen years ago, for a magazine interview that Heti was conducting, she pursued July by e-mail. "We decided to talk for an hour a week to start our friendship," Heti said. "That was our ritual. We sent long, long e-mails with pictures: this is my life, this is my first boyfriend, this is my pet. Just everything to fill in the gaps."

Before "All Fours," friendship never played a real role in July's work. It was as if there was no room for it; the poles of romance and loneliness loomed too large. But it is at the core of the new book, the thing that grounds it in the real. Jordi serves as the narrator's confidante and sounding board, just as, during the writing of the novel, Albuquerque did for July. On Wednesday nights, they would meet at Albuquerque's studio, or take long walks to their favorite vegetarian restaurant and discuss the big questions of their lives, July pausing along the way to write down scenes.

"There was so much pain and heaviness, and sharing it with you, not being alone, partly made it possible to write about it," July said to Albuquerque. She tipped back her head and mimed shouting to the heavens: " 'What are we supposed to do? Tell us! In this life! How do you be free *and* safe?' "

The first third of the novel—the erotic obsession with Davey, the extravagance of the Excelsior remodel—had come easily to July. But what would happen after? She had no idea. She started to see herself as a kind of perimenopause evangelist, transmitting to other women all the information that she had been collecting about their changing bodies. Drafts devolved into manuals and manifestos. She was yanked from this path by the publication of an actual work of nonfiction on the subject, Heather Corinna's "What Fresh Hell Is This?," and by the writer Rick Moody, an old friend and early encourager. Fiction is the lie that tells the truth, he reminded her. "I just started bawling," July said. "It was like he'd quoted the Bible passage that was going to save me."

One element from that heady period that survives in the final book, if in a rather altered form, is a series of interviews that July conducted with middle-aged friends about the state of their marriages and desires. "You remind me of me before I transitioned," one interviewee, a trans woman, tells the novel's narrator. "That sense that time is running out but you're too chickenshit to explode your life." When the narrator does explode her life, though, some of these same friends find her smug; she can't stop bragging, as if she, and she alone, has discovered the key to happiness.

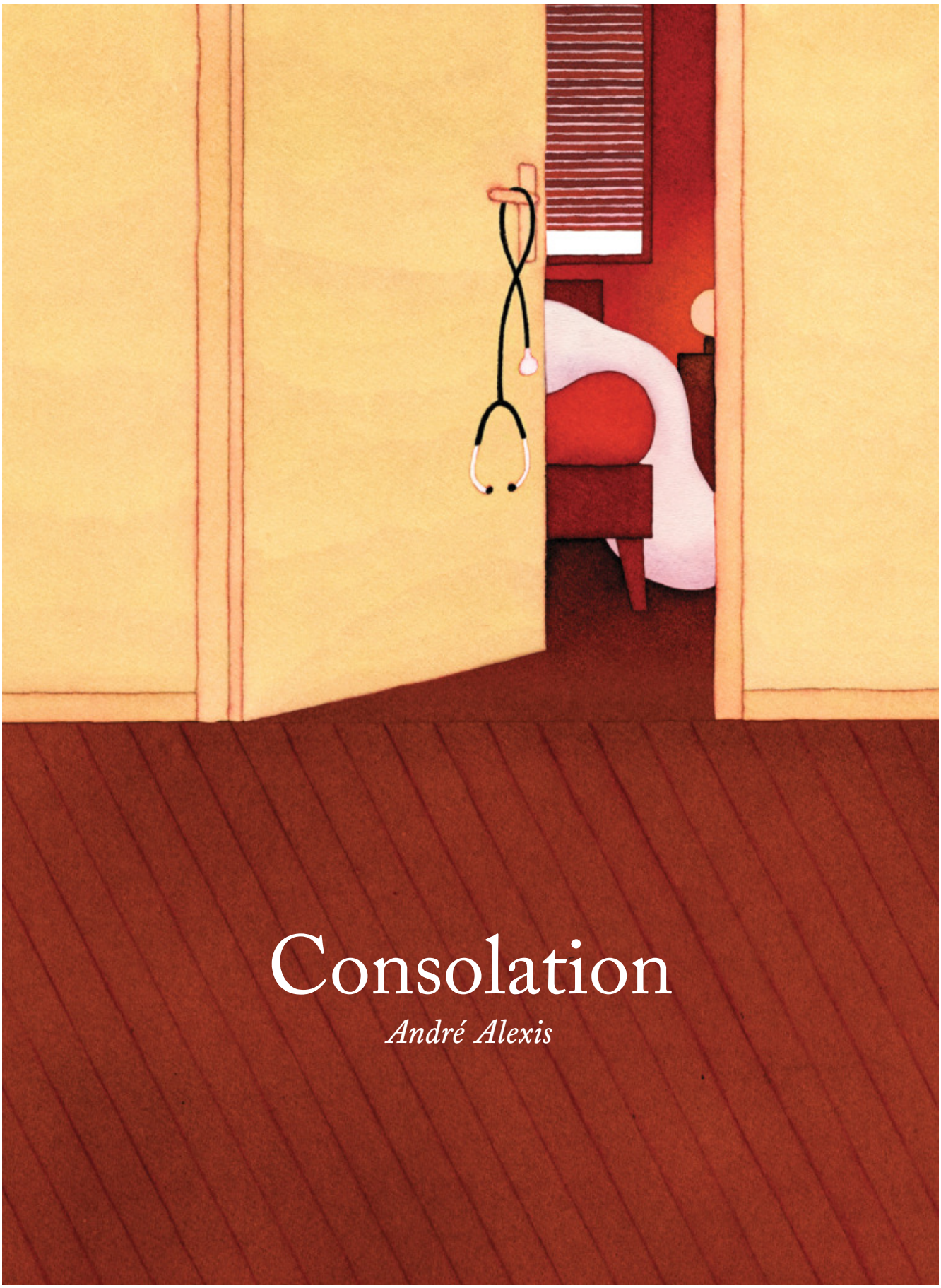
"I think one of Miranda's most brilliant features is her real respect for and kind of amazing capacity to summon peak-experience feelings," Maggie Nelson told me. "I'm more of an after-the-ecstasy-the-laundry kind of person. But I learn from Miranda the power of these moments that might cause someone to change their life." After reading an early draft of the novel, Heti had carefully delivered feedback. "I thought she wasn't seeing the character clearly," she said. "There was a way in which she was a stand-in for universal experience."

For July, the book had turned out to be a kind of prompt, and she thought that reading it would prompt other people to change their lives, too. Still, she had to be prepared to acknowledge that no woman is a true Everywoman. "What's that word when whales send out sound waves?" Nelson asked. "Echolocation. I think there's a kind of echolocation principle operating. Sometimes she finds an echo, the character. And sometimes the creature at hand says, No, that's not how it is for me."

Thinking about the novel entering the world, July felt vulnerable. "And the truth is, I feel vulnerable before every project comes out, but this one . . . " She paused. "It's like there's an invisible war, and I turned the lights on. Or I pointed at it, at least."

What was the war? I asked.

"The idea that, as a woman, as you get older, you'll not expand and get more and more powerful," she said. "I mean 'powerful' in all different senses, not just worldly power. I'm more useful, in a way, in the world. I need less, and I'm able to give more as I get older, you know? I don't have a feeling of dependency on anyone." The war wasn't just with the external world, with other people's impressions and expectations; its fiercest front was internal. "The only real threat is of outdated thinking, of calcifying in the mind," July had written in her notes, long before she knew the end of the novel—before she knew the beginning, even. "That scares me. But, again, who has the time? I really just keep going." ♦



Consolation

André Alexis

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDRÉ DERAINNE

Five years before my mother died, we had a violent argument—a thing that had never happened before. She was in her early eighties and still driving, and, because I am an inveterate back-seat driver, on one of our outings I suggested that she take a road she did not want to take. She resented it, and I could feel her anger growing.

When we got to her house, she came at me, all hundred and ten pounds of her, flailing, screaming, and cursing. It was like being assaulted by a very short scarecrow. I shouted back at her, pushed her away, and left the house, resolved never to see her again.

I did not speak to her for almost two years. A mistake, because, in the time it took for me to overcome my hurt feelings, dementia gradually took hold of her, so that the woman I made up with was no longer the one I had angered. The argument between us had been, I now think, a signal moment in her decline, a manifestation of the irrationality and confusion characteristic of the vascular dementia that erased her before she died.

At my mother's funeral, three years after we'd made up and not long after she'd forgotten my name, I was overcome by emotion. Not the emotion I'd expected, however. As her coffin rested on a bier in the aisle between the banks of pews, and my older sister spoke of how much we had loved her, most of my thoughts were of my father, her ex-husband, who had died ten years before.

This was as disheartening as it was emotionally tangled. I missed my father, of course, but I felt the injustice of his ghostly presence, as if even here, at my mother's funeral, his loss was as fresh as hers, the memory of him unavoidable.

The last time I saw my father, we spoke about love. I had helped him to make a difficult decision about a medical intervention that, given his weakened state, risked killing him outright. He saw that I was troubled, and he tried to reassure me.

"Any decision that's made with love can't be wrong," he said, "whatever the outcome."

I was moved by this. I did not—and do not—believe that decisions made with love can't be wrong. In fact, I wonder if they are not more often wrong than right. What moved me was his conviction, his belief that love was a guiding light. So when I agreed with him—as opposed to arguing with him, as I normally would have—it was to allow him whatever consolation his belief in love provided.

He lay back on the bed, tired. His face was gaunt, and he was thinner than he had been since his boyhood, but he was still handsome, his hair a statesmanlike white.

We were in a private room at Riverside Hospital. It was spring. The tree outside his window was pale green, and somewhere among its leaves there were birds, whose black, red, and white presence I could catch in glimpses or divine from the sudden, slight shaking of a branch.

My father had been a fairly loving parent to me and my three sisters. It is no surprise that two of them became doctors—a fact that filled him with as much relief as pride. I can equally say that I became a lawyer owing to his influence. About this, his feelings were mixed. By the time I passed the bar, he had spent more time with lawyers than he'd wanted, having been through three divorces. Still, he accepted that the profession was "venerable," that it would make me money and, all things considered, he was proud of me, too.

That said, he had been a terrible husband to our mother—unfaithful, untruthful, unkind. And, when he died, none of us were surprised that she refused to attend his funeral. It was grace enough that she called each of us to say, "I'm sorry you lost your father."

It was hard not to wonder how she would have taken the news of my father's deathbed faith in love. She had, over the years, insisted on her indifference to him and his fate. Perhaps she'd have politely acknowledged his spiritual growth and left it at that. In any case, at the time, I was too upset by my father's death to talk about it with anyone who did not love him.

I've always felt a kind of perversity in my relationships with my mother and father. It's as if I got to know them in reverse. As an infant, whose instinct it was to observe and manipulate them, I suppose I knew them instinctively: knew when to smile for them, knew when to make the noises that made them happy, knew how to annoy them into giving me food and drink.

Whether or not I actually knew them, they were not problematic until I was three, when I was left in Trinidad with my grandmother for a year while they prepared a home for us in Canada. On meeting them again, I found that we had become strangers. And a mistrust clouded our relationship until I was myself a parent, after which they began to evolve in my mind—as they are evolving still, becoming clearer as my memory of them fades.

My father, Kenneth Robertson, was born in Belmont, Trinidad, in 1931, at a time when Belmont was poor and unaccommodating. He was, for the rest of his life, ashamed of his origins, embarrassed by all of it: by Belmont itself and by Bedford Lane, the narrow street on which his family lived, so close to the houses across from them that they could hear their neighbor beating his wife, the whining of the neighbors' children, and the barking of a pothound they'd fed once, which would not go away.

My father and his four brothers slept in a small room, three in one bed (one up, one down, one up) and two in another. They were so used to the bedbugs that afflicted them that when my father's eldest brother decided to sun out their mattresses—thus killing the bedbugs—none of them could sleep, so uncomfortable were they on uninfested bedding.

You'd have thought, given my father's loathing of Belmont, that the place was a vacuum from which no light could escape. But this was far from the case. I don't know if shame at being poor drove the other boys as viciously as it drove my father, but, on a street where there were only a handful of houses, seven boys—including my father and one of his brothers—went on to become doctors. This fact, which my father sometimes alluded to, was the one good thing about Bedford Lane that he would acknowledge. Everything else was excrement or ashes, rats or pothounds.

That Bedford Lane had engendered so many doctors did not surprise me, largely because I had no idea, until I

visited Trinidad in my teens, just how difficult it would have been for boys born into poverty to make it to medical school through sheer diligence.

For girls without money, it was, at the time, impossible.

And this is where my mother, Helen Joseph, comes in. Her family was not as poor as my father's. Her father worked for the *Trinidad Guardian* until, older, he bought a sweetshop in San Juan with his savings. Not that a sweetshop in San Juan could, in the fifties, make them rich, but it kept them from hunger and, I believe, gave my mother a sense that life was open. She was not humiliated by her origins. It was my father who did the humiliating.

That he could humiliate her was due in part to the fact that they had known each other since their earliest childhood and he was her first love. I don't know if she was the first girl that he'd slept with, but she was, perhaps, the first one who stayed seduced after he'd seduced her. He had promised (she said) to love her until they were both in their nineties and fit only for lying in each other's arms, staring happily at the moon and listening to the kiskadees.

Was she moved by this cliché, or was it simply the beauty of him—a young, light-skinned Black man, just over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, with long eyelashes and oval eyes—his sense of humor, his ambition? Any number of women would have found these qualities difficult to ignore.

The way my mother tells it, he began sleeping with other women as soon as he got into medical school, and he kept at it obsessively after that. But in the early days of their marriage—premedicine—he was faithful. She was the one he loved, and she was the one guiding him. This is just as well, as she was the one who believed in their future, in the possibilities that lay before them, despite their having been born on a small island, nautical miles away from the worlds they heard about on BBC Radio's foreign service.

The reason they chose Canada—as opposed to, say, any of a hundred places with older, more interesting cultures—is banal. At my mother's instigation, my father applied to schools in Canada and the United States. He was accepted in several places, but they knew someone who knew someone who lived in Ottawa. So, Ottawa—with its medical school—was where they moved.

Canada turned out to be a good place for my father, a larger pond in which to swim. It took longer for the rightness of their decision to become clear to my mother. She had always intended to return to Trinidad, and she missed it terribly. But, as the years passed and Trinidad sank into a violent lawlessness that made it unrecognizable, my mother accepted that she had left at the right time and that, in choosing Canada, she had chanced on a stable world that suited her, despite the heartbreak she had to bear in the name of marriage.

Decades after their divorce, I asked her, "Why didn't you leave Dad sooner?"

"I would have," she answered, "if it weren't for that idiot John Waller."

Bellefeuille, when we moved there, in 1967, was a small town with a thousand inhabitants. It had once been somewhere important, one of a handful of places in Ontario where crude oil was discovered. At one end was a mansion built in the eighteen-hundreds, a place that had been abandoned and then kept up and then abandoned again. At the other end of town, two miles away, the main street turned suddenly from asphalt to gravel, as if Bellefeuille, having lost its mind, had wandered off into farmlands and fields where the byways had exchanged their names for numbers (10th Line, 8th Line, RR 7, County Road 5) or remained nameless.

The town itself was a hiccup of modest buildings and mediocre streets in the midst of fields, creeks, trees, and ponds. It was a good place to grow up. There was always some wooded area nearby where you could escape from adults. Plus, there were huge back yards and interesting fauna—skunks, mice, moles, beavers, groundhogs, toads, tree frogs, snakes, carp, leeches, and noisy birds.

(If I had been born in Canada, there is a chance I'd have been happy there.)

After his graduation from the University of Ottawa and an internship at Toronto General, my father had been recruited to Bellefeuille by Dr. Eli Behar, a Jewish man whose new medical center was in need of doctors.

Dr. Behar's Jewishness was significant in that he was already regarded with suspicion by many in town who were either openly or discreetly antisemitic. He was tolerated, by those who tolerated him, because he was the son of Menachem Behar, who had been the town's tailor for fifty years. But his inviting a Black doctor to Bellefeuille tested everyone's patience. What next? A Negro priest? Black Mounties?

Despite this, my father, who got along well with women *and* men, took no more than six or seven months to establish himself as a "good doctor." He was funny, likable, and irreproachably professional where medicine was concerned. Moreover, these were the days of house calls, which he made without complaint, and he had a good bedside manner. Going into his patients' homes created an intimacy that encouraged trust, which led to the stunning surmise that, while other Black people might be troublesome, this one wasn't. So when, two years after coming to Bellefeuille, my father tired of working for Dr. Behar and struck out on his own, he took most of his patients with him and found more than enough work to support his family.

I imagine that my father felt gratified by his accomplishment. And, if so, this may have spurred a conviction that sleeping with his patients was acceptable, his due, even. He had dragged himself out of the pit that was Bedford Lane and arrived at this outpost of civilization where he could do useful things for people—examine their bodies for flaws, deliver babies, prescribe medication, recommend specialists in Sherman. His reward for escaping from Belmont was the authority that being a doctor conferred, an authority that conveyed power, an aphrodisiac that must have been as arousing for the women he slept with as it was for him.

This, in any case, is my understanding. I assume that class, race, and re-

venge were what drove him to sleep with his patients, though sleeping with his patients could—and *should*—have cost him his profession. At the same time, I wonder what he was looking for in the small-town women who came to see him.

I wonder about those women almost as often as I do about my father. What were *they* thinking when they looked at Dr. Robertson? We were the only Black people in town, the only ones within a ten-mile radius or so. The ideas they had about Black men came mostly from television, I imagine. My father used to complain that his patients regularly told him how much he looked like Malcolm X, how much like Martin Luther King, like Redd Foxx, like Flip Wilson, like Richard Pryor, though none of those men looked alike and none looked like my father. He was a kind of bellwether, a reminder to the people of Bellefeuille of whichever Black man was then prominent in American culture.

This was also around the time of the race riots in Detroit, whose tellings and retellings were like campfire horror stories for white people. So it may be that the danger by association was arousing. Whatever the case, it seems unlikely that the women he slept with, though they knew him physically, actually slept with Ken Robertson, the man himself.

Yet here, too, I find myself at a kind of impasse. My father was handsome, personable, and, according to my mother, very good in bed. During one of the most unnecessary conversations I ever had with her, my mother told me more than I wanted to know about fucking my father. To her mind, "good in bed" was principally a matter of experience. As my father had slept with a good number of women, he knew how to please her. It's quite possible, then, that, for at least some of the women he slept with, he was less a Black man than simply someone who knew his way around a woman's body. In which case, race may have had nothing to do with it where sex was involved.

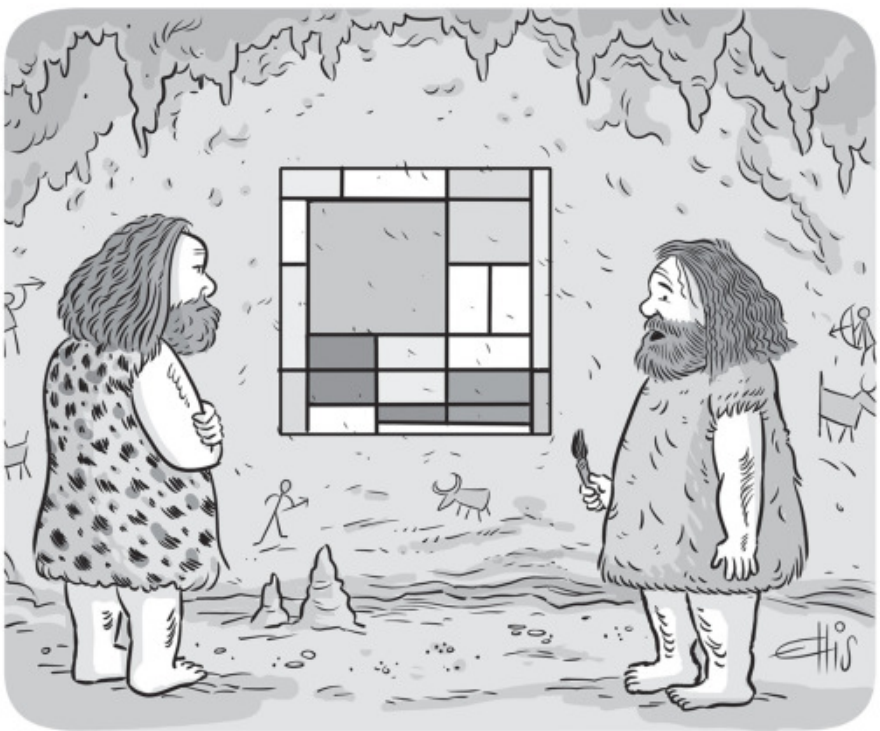
In any event, the Wallers came into our lives shortly after my father set up his own office on Longo Street. They entered our home like bringers of good tidings. For one thing, they were the first white people, aside from the Behars, whom I remember my parents entertaining. It was the whole business, too: the house clean, my mother in makeup, my father wearing a jacket and smelling of aftershave. Then, the hors d'œuvres: shrimp cocktail, baby fingers arranged around a red sauce that smelled of horseradish; smoked oysters, glistening tabs neatly arranged on a plate beside white crackers; pearl onions and olives in their own bowls; and cheese on a wooden board. All the foods that made my toes curl when I was eleven, and which, on top of that, meant that adults were congregating and I was to be seen, not heard.

I remember a handful of sharp details about Mrs. Waller. She wore a white dress with red, crisscrossing lines on it, and she was what was called "busty" in those days, a word I associated with pigeons. Her hair was blond, and it hung down to the middle of her back, unfussed with. She had a necklace with a pendant of some sort, and her eyeshadow was bluish, as was the style then, though I'd never seen it in Bellefeuille.

It was her husband who left the deeper impression that evening. He was a tall, dark-haired man, physically imposing and wide. I remember that his jacket was brown corduroy and slightly small for him. He wore it over a white shirt and bluejeans. And, to me, the jeans were impressive. They weren't what one wore on evenings out, even I knew that. But he was the kind of man who was proud of being a car salesman in Sherman, the kind who would not—or, maybe, could not—put on airs.

When, out of politeness, I said, as I had been instructed to say, "Good evening, Mr. Waller," he laughed loudly, a false laugh, and answered, "To hell with that shit! My name's John. My *father* was Mr. Waller."

I liked him immediately. He was exactly the kind of adult to thrill an eleven-year-old—a plainspoken menefreghista who wore the clothes I would have chosen had I been an adult. What my mother and father thought of him would have been much more complicated. To begin with, he was at their house wearing casual clothes and using the language of the street. It was one thing to refuse to stand on ceremony when you were at home. It was something else to sneer at the courtesy my parents offered. Was he simply ignorant and



"No, you're right. It's dumb."

graceless? Or was he, rather, spitting in the soup of the Black people who'd invited him to dinner?

Adding to the complexities of the question were the feelings that John must have provoked in my parents. The man would have reminded my father of the Belmont from which he'd escaped—a place where ceremony of any sort was regarded as pretentious. To my father, John Waller's behavior must have stunk of mildew and kerosene.

I'm sure it didn't help that John allowed himself—to my delight—to turn down the shrimp cocktail and French cheese. Nor would it have helped that he barely touched the stewed chicken, callaloo, and fried plantains that my mother served. Even his wife chided him for this, assuring him that the food was wonderful while thanking my parents for their graciousness.

"I can't help it," he answered. "I'm used to Canadian food. Anything spicy keeps me up at night farting like a pug."

His face was red, suggesting embarrassment, but his tone was defiant. No doubt his wife had forced him to come to this evening, and who knows but that this was his way of getting back at her. And, again, my eleven-year-old self was in John's corner. I disagreed about the stewed chicken—my favorite food—but his discomfort was a mirror of my own, and, besides, I found the idea that he farted like a small dog endlessly funny.

Nowadays, being twice the age of the adults at that soirée and knowing its aftermath, I'm sympathetic to Mr. Waller for other reasons. Given that he and my parents had nothing in common, whose idea had it been to bring them together? It is clear that neither my mother—who dryly offered to make him a grilled cheese sandwich—nor John himself would have conceived such a thing. It would have to have been Mrs. Waller or my father. In which case, it is likely that they were already sleeping together and that this evening was some sort of false flag, a way to throw their respective spouses off the scent by bringing friendship into the equation—the idea being that friends do not betray friends.

I'm almost certain that my parents never went for dinner at the Wallers', and I don't know if my mother ever saw Sarah Waller again. I did, though, on two occasions, when my father took me with him to the Wallers' home, which was just out of town, off the 10th Line.

(It was my father's not so secret wish that I take up medicine. He would have been grateful to have his son become a doctor, relieved that I would not suffer the poverty that he had, that I would be self-sufficient. The house calls I made with him—maybe a dozen in total—were meant to pique my interest in medicine. But they did the opposite. I found it oppressive entering what I mostly remember as darkened homes and being told to wait while my father saw to the ailing and while others in the household—husband, wife, whoever—tried to keep me company, though their minds were elsewhere and their distress was, at times, disturbing. I found these visits more and more embarrassing until, after a time, I refused to go with him.)

The first house call at the Wallers' was perhaps just that—a doctor's visit. The front door was answered by the Wallers' eldest daughter, Madeleine, my age, who let us in and followed my father to a bedroom where Mrs. Waller was lying in bed. My father, who had come to give Mrs. Waller a shot of some sort, closed the door behind him. Madeleine and I could hear moaning and coughing, and then Mrs. Waller let out a wail.

When I later asked my father why Mrs. Waller had cried out, he answered

that the needle had hurt her. And I accepted this because there was no false emphasis in his delivery, nothing in his tone to suggest a lie or an incomplete truth. His answer was so matter-of-fact that I didn't bother to ask what the shot was for, nor did I wonder why a grown woman should cry out at receiving one.

The second house call at the Wallers' was different, in fact and in my memory. For one thing, my father insisted that I *and* my sister Hecate come with him. I can't say for sure, but it seems likely that we were meant to keep the Wallers' daughters—Madeleine and Cynthia—busy, it being summer and school being out.

Mrs. Waller herself answered the door. She did not look ill, and the house smelled of the apple crumble she had, she said, just made, and would we children like a piece? There was nothing gloomy about the home. All the curtains were open, and my first impressions were of bright sun and the taste of apples and brown sugar.

Mrs. Waller was in a light floral dress, which stopped just above her knees and through which the sun passed, allowing a view of her body that was occluded when she was not in the light. I was confused by these glimpses of her body and embarrassed for her. She asked my father if he wanted a glass of dandelion wine. To my surprise, he said yes. He had, of course, brought his black leather bag with him, and, picking it up, he said to me, "Sam, I want you to mind the girls while Mrs. Waller and I go to her room. I'm going to give her a shot of B_{12} to help her get over her anemia."

I was at the beginning of that time in life when anything that hints at the sexual is fascinating but beyond articulation. It did not occur to me, for instance, that Mrs. Waller had worn that dress with nothing underneath it in order to please my father. I assumed, rather, that I was the only one who could see through it, that it was an accident, that she had dressed in a hurry. And yet, at the same time, I *did* know, and I was suddenly interested in what my father and Mrs. Waller were going to do in the bedroom. So whereas during other house calls I had quietly endured the waiting, this time I left Madeleine, Cynthia, and Hecate playing with dolls in the yard and went inside on the pretext that I wanted a glass of water.

The kitchen was at the other end of the house from the Wallers' bedroom, and I remember feeling that I would get punished if I were caught, though no one had forbidden me from going to the room. I went as quietly as I could

along the hallway, tiptoeing as one does at that age, using one's whole body for silence—shoulders raised, hands forward like a cat's paws, feet lifted higher than needed at each step. And as a result I could hear, well before I got to the door, the sound of Mrs. Waller—wordless, but as if quietly and arrhythmically complaining in a high, childish voice—the more subdued and deeper sound of my father's breathing, and the sound of something dully knocking against a wall.

"What are you doing?"

At Cynthia's loudly chirped question, the bedroom fell silent. Then Mrs. Waller called out, "Cynthia! Go play in the yard!"

I put my finger to my lips and shepherded Cynthia back to the yard. I knew that I knew something I wasn't supposed to know, though I didn't know what it was.

Reflecting on that moment now, fifty years or so later, it seems more complicated, not less. Beyond the penis-and-vagina tumult, there must have been worlds of fantasy. I mean, what did my father and Mrs. Waller think they were doing that was worth risking discovery by their children or devastating their respective spouses and setting fire to the lives they were leading? Or were they not thinking at all, surrendering, rather, to the joy of wanting and being wanted, though their surrender might have unpredictable effects on those around them?

One such effect is that the word "anemia" is erotic to me.

Another word: passion—from the Latin *pati*, to suffer—an idea that's like a chasm, extending as it does from Christ being crucified to a man quietly touching the inner thigh of his friend's wife beneath a dinner table. So, my father and Mrs. Waller were passionate, and that passion left its mark.

(I think of this moment as the first one in my professional life, if for no other reason than that I've spent decades litigating it in my imagination. At times, I wonder if I heard what I thought I heard. At times, I wonder how I would prove it. If counsel proposed that what I heard was two people building a bird feeder—one crying out from the pain of splinters, one exhausted from trying to hold the feeder up—what could I answer? Over the years, I've come up with countless proposals of that sort, each as absurd as the last, all impossible to refute. But what was—what remains—influential about the moment is not what I believed was happening between my father and Mrs. Waller. It wasn't the moral turpitude that interested me. It was my questioning of the moment's significance that initiated my career.)

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My father's affair with Mrs. Waller went on for quite a while, it seems, though my mother did not find out about it until a year or so after the Wallers came to our house for dinner.

It wasn't that she didn't know my father was screwing other women. She had, for instance, found a used condom in the garbage pail of his office one day while, to help save money, she was cleaning the place herself. When confronted, he denied that the condom was his—which left open the possibility that someone had broken into the office, had sex there, and disposed of the condom in the pail. My mother knew that this was unlikely, but then people had already broken into the office looking for drugs. It was not *impossible* that hooligans had had sex there as well.

Also, as unlikely as this horny break-in was, she *wanted* it to be true. My mother wanted all the signs to mean what she wanted them to mean or else be meaningless. The woman who'd stared at her defiantly at a town meeting was *not* one of my father's lovers. The lace panties she found in our basement had nothing to do with my father. The perfume that clung to him for days before dissipating belonged to "a patient who had lost her sense of smell"—my father's explanation. The working late on weekends, the being too tired to have sex with her for months on end, and so on and on.

My mother became a master at denying, forgetting, forgiving, and banishing. So it's not surprising that the news of my father's affair with Mrs. Waller had to come by extraordinary means, in order to overcome her barriers to knowing. One day, John Waller called my mother and asked to meet her. Though she could hear that he was distraught, she wanted nothing to do with him.

"What is it you want, *Mr.* Waller?"

"I'm going to kill your husband," he

said, "if he doesn't stop harassing my wife! I'll kill him!"

"What are you telling me for?" my mother asked. "If you're going to kill him, you're going to kill him. Why do you need to see me?"

He hadn't expected this response, it seemed. In fact, it must have shaken him so deeply that, upset and angry as he was, he began to cry, which annoyed my mother even more. Mr. Waller loved his wife. He was crushed. He was going to lose his daughters, everything he had, because "your husband can't keep his pecker in his pants."

If my mother was irritated at the beginning of the conversation, she was now enraged.

"If your idiot of a wife would stop taking it out of his pants, we wouldn't be here, would we?"

In the past, when my father's infidelities had come to light, my mother had not had to deal with husbands or boyfriends. She knew the usual triangles that his infidelity generated. She knew what it was to have his women inform her that they loved her husband or tearfully confess their regret at having slept with him. These were humiliating encounters, but my mother believed she understood the language of women, even white women. She knew the tone and the words that distinguished genuine remorse from the seemingly heartfelt confessions that, like something poisoned, were meant to hurt her and to destroy her family.

Dealing with Mr. Waller was different. My mother did not believe that he would kill her husband, but his self-pity, his "blubbering," as she called it, and his pathetic inability to murder my father were more humiliating, because she was not used to dealing with husbands and because being asked to sympathize with Mr. Waller, to acknowledge his pain as if *he* were the victim and her humiliation counted for nothing, was a further degradation.

This all being the case, you'd have thought that Mr. Waller's call would be the final provocation that would drive her to leave my father. It almost was. But, according to my mother, it was the absurdity of the call that convinced her to stay. The idea that there were men in the world as immature as John Waller—that "damned Baby Huey"—showed my father in a much better light, one that was sufficient to hold her interest.

When telling me all this, she added, "Anyway, it's better the devil you know."

Hearing my mother say this was like hearing someone say she'd prefer to live with Beelzebub for fear of finding Satan. It was odd. And, of course, her decision—hanging up on Mr. Waller, remaining faithful to my father—was one that she would regret when my father finally left her for another woman, left her, that is, even after she got down on her knees and pleaded with him to stay for his family's sake, if not for hers.

Stranger still, she held her decision to stay with my father—and all the humiliation that followed—against John Waller. When she told me about his call, she was once again furious, not at my father for sleeping with John's wife but at John himself, who, in the end, got what he wanted. My father stopped sleeping with Sarah Waller.

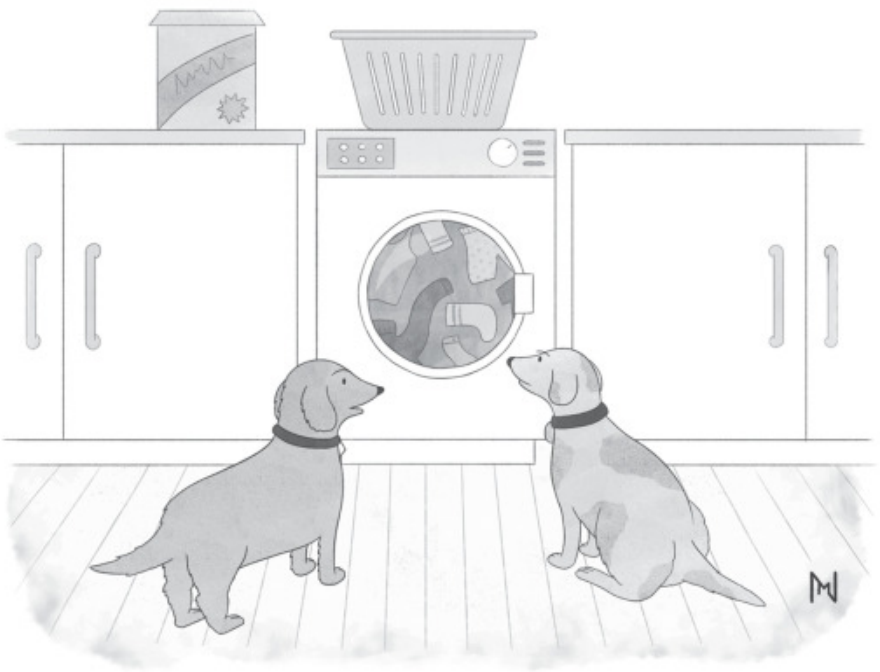
Why he stopped sleeping with her puzzles me. It had to be love, no? For my mother, I mean. Or was he worried that Mr. Waller would shoot him? Or was it pride in his reputation that drove him to abandon Mrs. Waller? Not being ruled by my sexual desires—being, in fact, wary of them—I find it hard to believe that my father would endanger his reputation for the sake of a little interchooksy, to use his word.

Pride is the answer I find most convincing. I believe he wanted to be a pillar of the community, a man so admired—despite his origins, despite his color—that the people of Bellefeuille would invite him and his family to wave at them from a special float in the Santa Claus parade. And this they did, one cold December day that I do not remember fondly.

For all that, he went on sleeping with his patients, constantly risking his reputation.

Nor do I believe my mother's "better the devil you know," her fear of the unknown as the reason she stayed with my father after his affair with Mrs. Waller. She was herself a complicated person, fiercely independent but in thrall to my father or, maybe, in love with her own creation, which, having coaxed him away from Trinidad and supported him through medical school, is what he was. Whatever he did, however he hurt her, my mother could still look at him and think, I made you! You owe me! It is easy to imagine Galatea leaving Pygmalion but much harder to imagine the reverse.

Or perhaps she loved him—simply,



"What did I miss?"

truly, from the depths of herself, while believing that he loved her, too, that he *must*, after all they had shared.

I am sure that my father's behavior was influential on my decision to study family law. I have never looked on the misery of families without wishing to help. And although I am not particularly sentimental—perhaps, at times, not sentimental enough—it is difficult not to see myself in the children of bad marriages.

But years of considering these fraught unions have led me to appreciate the small miracle of unhappiness. I don't mean, of course, that unhappiness is desirable. I mean that it is capable of travelling such great distances. For instance, I often felt the impact of Bedford Lane on my father's behavior—his need for validation, his struggle for a sense of self-worth, his shame at his origins. What surprises me is that the lane—the houses so close to one another, the sound of a man beating his wife because he has spent the little money he had on drink, the dogs that rush at strangers—had its influence on me as well, through my father.

I understand his feeling unworthy of love. And although I did not live on Bedford Lane, I am affected by the squalor it represented to him. It's difficult not to wonder how far back the misery goes—like seeing light from a distant star and marvelling at its longevity—and how far forward. Do my own daughters feel the presence of Bedford Lane in me?

Sometime after my father's funeral, my eldest, Dora, surprised me by asking, "Dad, did you love your father?"

"Of course," I answered. "Why are you asking me that?"

I was upset that what I thought of as the truth of my feelings, the strength of my affection, was not obvious.

"You never talked about him," she answered. "I always thought you didn't like him."

And, though I was upset, it was Dora's question that provoked me to piece together what I knew and felt about Kenneth Robertson: his origins, his upbringing, our life together, his fear that I might fall back into the pit he'd climbed out of—Bedford Lane, Belmont, Trinidad and Tobago, the West Indies.

In short, it was after my father's death that I became more inclined to love him for who he was. And it is perhaps not so surprising that thoughts of him intruded on my mother's funeral, because my mother's death was also a moment in my relationship with my father.

When I visited my father on his deathbed and he spoke about love leading to the right decisions, I wondered if he knew how devastating his behavior had sometimes been.

"Did you love my mother?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Of course. But we were so young. . . ."

"What about that woman you had the affair with in Bellefeuille? Sarah Waller."

"Sarah Waller? I don't know Sarah Waller."

"Mom said her husband threatened to kill you. She must have told you about it."

He laughed, to the extent that his pain allowed it.

"I think I'd remember that, don't you?"

The pain overcame him then, and I went to find a nurse. By the time the nurse had come and the morphine had kicked in, the subject had changed. But, given how he'd answered my questions, I'm convinced that he didn't want to talk about the past. He had clearly lied to me. I could see the recognition on his face when he heard Sarah's name. That said, I wasn't sure what he was hiding—shame, love, longing, nostalgia, humiliation? Or nothing so dramatic? He may have simply wanted peace, to lie in his hospital bed with a notion of love to lessen his apprehension. Because, as a doctor, he must have known that his death was soon to come.

My mother's indifference at the news of his death wasn't entirely convincing, either. I can't say that she still loved my father, but I could always sense something, a kind of struggle for equanimity, when he was mentioned. How could it have been otherwise when he was the man she'd begged to stay with her, and he'd said no, because he had already moved on?

Years after my father's death, my mother had a series of small strokes that left her with a dementia that was as surprising for what it left as for what it took away. It took away most of her recent memories and then, gradually, most of her distant ones as well. What remained were some two dozen memories that she returned to again and again, as if her self were a receding tide that gradually exposed these hard, bright moments from the past: her father crying when she left Trinidad, a friend who had fallen down some stairs to his death, a letter given to her by an unsuspected admirer, a woman who'd said something unpleasant to her at a funeral.

Among these irreducible memories was the moment when my father assured her that he would love her until they were both in their nineties—moon-gazing, listening to the kiskadees. This promise of his—made when they were in their teens—came up sometimes as often as ten or twenty times in half an hour: returning, returning, returning.

"Do you know what your father said to me?"

At first, she spoke of my father's promise with anger. She was still Helen enough to be bitter. But as time passed she would mention it as if it were an unusual fact, one she could not place, one she found confusing, though she was certain it had significance. By the end of her life, it was clear that my father's avowal of love had become more or less meaningless to her, so I wasn't sure what to feel when, a few months before she died, my father's words and all the memories that had hitherto remained passed into silence and she stopped speaking altogether.

She was thin then, her white hair slick, as if pasted to her skull, combed to keep it neat. Her skin was still brown but slightly dull, her wrists delicate-looking. I have no idea, of course, which shard of memory stayed with her the longest. Knowing that my father's promise to love her had been an unpleasant memory, it seems odd to hope that it stayed till the end, but I do.

Because my mother's death was such a long going-away, I like to think of her as she was before dementia took her—strong-willed, wary, scornful of my father's words. Not bitter but not fooled, either. Imagining her like that makes it possible for me to hope that some part of the love my young father felt for her could still touch her, before it vanished along with everything else. ♦

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

OFF THE LEASH

The wacky and wonderful world of the Westminster Dog Show.

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

Bernard de Menthon was born around the year 1000, near what is now the border of Switzerland and France. He was raised in a castle, given a first-class education, and, in time, affianced by his father to a noblewoman, as befit the scion of an ancient and wealthy family. By then, however, de Menthon had grown into a pious young man whose plans for the future did not include marriage. According to legend, the night before the wedding, he fled the castle by jumping out of a high window, whereupon a band of angels caught him and lowered him gently to the ground.

Ordained as a priest, de Menthon began preaching in villages throughout the region of Aosta, a territory that included a mountain pass already in use for at least a thousand years to cross the Western Alps. In de Menthon's day, it was a popular route for Christians making the pilgrimage to Rome, but the journey was perilous. Bands of brigands routinely staked out the area to attack travellers, the pass itself was harrowing—eight thousand feet high, buried in snow, prone to avalanches—and de Menthon often found himself ministering to travellers who had been subjected to its terrors. And so, when he became the archdeacon of Aosta, he established a hospice in the pass, staffed by monks who offered aid to pilgrims venturing over the mountains.

At first, the hospice simply provided food, shelter, and a reminder to people inclined to make trouble that they did so under the watchful eye of God, or, anyway, of the godly. Over time, though, the monks began dispatching search parties to recover the missing. No one knows exactly when those search parties first began bringing along dogs, but by the early seventeen-hundreds the search parties *were* dogs—clever, indefatigable creatures capable of smelling a body under twenty feet of snow, who patrolled the area unaccompanied by humans. They generally travelled in pairs, so that, if they found someone too sick or hurt to move, one dog could return to the hospice to summon help while the other stayed behind, lying down atop the stricken person to offer warmth and hope. At some point, the hospice started keeping track of those rescues; by 1897, when one dog found a boy who had nearly frozen to death after falling into a crevasse, the dogs were known to have saved some two thousand people. Also by then, the long-dead Bernard de Menthon had been canonized, which is why the pass, the hospice, and the dogs themselves are all known today by the name St. Bernard.

There is still a hospice in Great St. Bernard Pass, and there are still dogs there as well, but they no longer perform rescue missions. That job was rendered obsolete toward the middle of the twentieth century, partly by a tunnel that routed people away from the pass and partly by inventions, such as the helicopter and the avalanche transceiver, that made it easier to save wayward travellers. Like the phenomenal views of Mont Blanc, the St. Bernards who remain at Great St. Bernard Hospice are now mostly just a tourist attraction.

That transformation, from working dog to pet, life-saving companion to pampered adornment, is, writ small, the story of dogs and humans. Some thirty thousand years ago, when wolves first crept near our campfires, eying the scraps and bones, we made a tacit bargain: food for them, protection for us. Today, the terms of that relationship are no longer quite as clear or, possibly, quite as sane. We are still giving food to the descendants of those wolves—thirty-pound bags of Eukanuba slung into the shopping cart, puppuccinos at the drive-through, human-grade meals flash-frozen and shipped on dry ice to our doorstep. We've also let those former wolves into our homes, where they bark in the middle of the night, whine to be let out at five in the morning, eat the new area rug and then vomit it up all over the living-room floor. And we share our wealth with them as well: studies estimate that Americans spend more than a hundred billion dollars each year on all that dog food, plus grooming, boarding, veterinary care, dog toys, dog training, dog walking, and doggy day care. Given all of this, one might reasonably ask what we are getting in return.

Some years ago, it occurred to the journalist and former mutt owner Tommy Tomlinson that one place to look for an answer was a dog show, a forum optimized to display the weirdness of the current human-canine relationship: our lavish expenditure on dogs, our equally outsized emotional investment in them, and the degree to which we have quite literally shaped them as a species. Tomlinson was not, at the time, a fan of such shows; he was just watching TV, hoping to catch some professional wrestling, when he landed on the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show instead. The

DOLLY FAIBYSHEV; OPPOSITE: ANTONIO GIOVANNI PINNA

Owners can spend hundreds of thousands per year to campaign their dogs; some purchase private security for them.

questions that came to mind, as Shih Tzus paraded around the ring, were not very scientific, but they were very American: *Are these dogs happy*? *Are any dogs happy*? *Why do dogs make me so happy*? Those musings form the kernel of his new book, "Dogland: Passion, Glory, and Lots of Slobber at the Westminster Dog Show" (Avid Reader Press).

The dog-show circuit has come in for long-form treatment before—most famously in Christopher Guest's 2000 film, "Best in Show," a mockumentary with an emphasis on the mockery. "Dogland" takes a different approach, presumably because, on the evidence of his writing, Tomlinson is too sincere a guy to pull off satire. His previous book, "The Elephant in the Room," is a wry, tender, ultimately hopeful first-person account of being, as he put it, a fat guy trying to lose weight in America. This new book is thinner, so to speak, and occasionally suffers from a certain distractibility. Unnecessary listicles ("Dog Haters, Ranked"; "Traveling Dogs, Ranked") interrupt a narrative in need of no additional comic fodder, and Tomlinson sometimes indulges in lengthy digressions on, for instance, the WeRateDogs social-media empire, or the series of bulldogs, all named Uga, that for generations have been the mascot of Tomlinson's alma mater, the University of Georgia.

But, whatever the weaknesses of "Dogland," Tomlinson is a very funny writer, and he has the right relationship to his subject: equal parts dubious and generous, with a pleasing mixture of conviviality and comedic distance. Christopher Guest made the strangeness of dog shows more pronounced by populating his fictional version with a bunch of oddballs; Tomlinson makes the strangeness more interesting by introducing us to real people who, despite dedicating their lives to dog shows, do not seem particularly unhinged. For much of the book, we follow a woman named Laura King, who co-owns a show-dog kennel with a long string of accolades to its name. King, a second-generation dog aficionado who learned to walk by holding on to the tail of a Belgian sheepdog, projects the contentment of someone who can't believe she gets to do what she does for a living. She is so convincingly sane that it takes a while for readers to agree: the more we learn about "the fancy," as insiders call the dog-show world, the more we can't believe *anyone* does this for a living.

To outsiders, the weirdest thing about the Westminster Dog Show is that the dogs don't actually do anything. This is not because they aren't capable of remarkable feats—witness the St. Bernards of St. Bernard Hospice—or because those capabilities can't be channelled into audience-friendly competitions. As the Internet will be happy to show you, dogs routinely vie for prizes in hunting, herding, scenting, Frisbee, and dock diving—a kind of canine long jump into water, the world record for which is held by a whippet named Sounders, a thirty-six-inch dog able to leap nearly thirty-seven feet.

Nothing even remotely that entertaining happens at Westminster, or at any of the other "breed shows" held across the country. The dogs mostly stand around being admired, and occasionally go for a little trot around a ring. Imagine Nascar, if the cars just sat there on the track, and from time to time the race officials checked under the hood. In this sense, dog shows are less like, say, the Preakness and more like a county fair, where rabbits and heifers who excel at being rabbits and heifers are given blue ribbons.

As with those creatures, all the dogs at a dog show, from the Tibetan mastiff to the toy fox terrier, are judged by the same single criterion: how well they conform to the standard of their breed. Like written language, record players, and robot vacuum cleaners, those breeds are a product of human ingenuity. Without exception, every dog breed in the world started out its evolutionary journey as a wolf and then got tinkered with by us, bit by bit, until it could do some useful and specialized thing. Dachshunds were designed to wriggle into a badger den, seize the badger, and drag it out—or, if necessary, be dragged out by their owner, which is why they have unusually strong tails. The Norwegian lundehund, which boasts extra toes and a notably flexible neck, was bred to hunt puffins on the island cliffs of Norway. The bulldog, as you might guess, was built to control bulls, by latching on to their faces and dragging them to the ground. An easier lot fell to the many dogs bred to do nothing but amuse the wealthy and powerful, including the Maltese, which seems to have been luxuriating in royal laps since the time of Julius Caesar.

Today, the American Kennel Club officially recognizes more than two hundred dog breeds, and some of the fun of "Dogland" comes from Tomlinson's reactions to them. The one shown by Laura King, a Samoyed—a dog from Siberia, bred to pull sledges and help hunt polar bears—is so dazzlingly white as to resemble "a walking snowbank." A Neapolitan mastiff possesses "the build of a fullback and the face of a thousand-year-old man." A long, low-slung breed called a Skye terrier "looks like it ate a Slinky." Tomlinson's pithy assessments stand in sharp contrast to the breeds' official descriptions, which can exceed two thousand words and read like a cross between a love letter and a coroner's report. Of the American English coonhound, for instance, it is specified that "a line from occiput to brow is a little above, and parallel to, a line from eye to nose," and also that its facial expression is both "kind" and "houndy."

The people who obsess over these standards form a subculture of impressive vitality. The American Kennel Club sanctions thousands of dog shows each year—enough that more than a hundred are likely taking place during any given week. "Every day," Tomlinson jokes, "my dog-show Google alerts unroll like a CVS receipt." A few of these shows are famous—including the National Dog Show, which is sometimes confused with Westminster, because it airs on NBC on Thanksgiving Day, making it the most watched dog show in America—but the vast majority take place out of the public eye, at hotels, convention centers, and fairgrounds around the country.

Regardless of their size or standing, most of these shows work basically the same way. In the first round, dogs of a particular breed compete against one another. The winners, declared Best of Breed, advance to the next round, where competitors are grouped into seven categories, such as herding dogs, toy dogs, and terriers. That means dogs of different breeds are now competing against one another, yet the standard by which they are judged remains the same: the question is not whether this pointer is

superior to that Pomeranian, but whether the pointer is more pointery than the Pomeranian is Pomeraniany. If that strikes you as absurd, you're right. Nonetheless, winners are chosen, and go on to compete for the over-all prize, Best in Show.

All of this is something of a simplification, partly because, in the early rounds, dogs compete only against other dogs of the same sex. This yields, for each breed, a Winners Dog and—brace yourself—a Winners Bitch. Tomlinson is appropriately and comically uncomfortable with that word ("My interview transcripts all have me stumbling around and saying something like 'uh, you know, female dog'"), but he uses it all the same, arguing that it accurately reflects dog-show culture. That much is certainly true. Here is the A.K.C., describing one of the awards given out at every show: "The Select Bitch is similar to Awards of Merit in that this bitch is the next best as far as the quality of the Bitches in competition."

Two things can be inferred from this: first, the dog-show community, like all groups obsessed with good breeding, is also obsessed with gender; and, second, every dog show emits a faint aura of campiness. Consider all the primping. It takes hours to get a show dog ready to enter the ring, a process that involves brushing, trimming, shampooing, conditioning, blow-drying, and applying any number of products—hairspray, hair gel, volumizer, whitener, eyeliner, heaven knows what else—many of them from name brands more commonly used on humans. Or consider that, at certain shows, you can hire private security for your pug. Or that every dog invited to participate at Westminster will receive an invitation printed on gold paper in purple ink.

Each year, those invitations are sent to the twelve hundred or so dogs who have racked up the most points on the weekly dog-show grind. To fill the remaining slots, for a total of twenty-five hundred, other qualified dogs, meaning those that have achieved the status of champion, are selected by lottery. Such dogs have a CH before their names, and sometimes a GCH, for grand champion, but many of the dogs who make it to Westminster bear other honorifics as well: MBIS, RGCH, OM, MACH. Some of these are official A.K.C. designations; others, Tomlinson writes, "are more like a celebrity's honorary doctorate."

Thanks to those qualifications, plus the nomenclatural practices mandated by the A.K.C. and the aesthetic sensibilities of devotees of the fancy, the average show-dog name is truly preposterous. A racehorse who is known around the barn as Big Red might have an official name like Secretariat, but the Samoyed shown by Laura King throughout "Dogland," who goes by Striker, enters the ring as MBIS MBISS CAN GCH AM GR CHP Vanderbilt 'N Printemp's Lucky Strike. In 1943, Westminster was won by one Ch. Pitter Patter of Piperscroft, a miniature poodle. Other winners could be minor characters in "Game of Thrones," like Ch. St. Aubrey Dragonora of Elsdon, a Pekinese, or hip-hop artists devised by Dr. Seuss, like Ch. Clussexx Three D Grinchy Glee, a Sussex spaniel.

What do these winners win? Almost nothing. At dog shows, as on "The Great British Bake Off," the ratio between hoopla and reward is drastically and rather charmingly askew. If your horse takes top honors at the Kentucky Derby, you will bring home more than two million dollars and can anticipate many millions more in breeding fees. If your dog takes top honors at Westminster, you will go home with some trophies, a ribbon, and a picture frame. Your dog, meanwhile, might be invited to ring the opening bell of the New York Stock Exchange, which is as close to serious money as it will ever bring you.

In fact, if a dog is at Westminster, you can bet that the serious money has flowed in the other direction. Every dog that has won the show in recent memory has been "campaigned," meaning that a professional handler has taken it around the show circuit for anywhere from one to three years, at a cost that owners don't like to discuss but that can run to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. The handlers get some of that money, while the rest goes to food, fees, veterinary care, and glossy advertisements intended to impress judges, which may or may not work but do at least shield dog magazines, unlike the rest of print media, from a life-threatening drop in ad revenue. (The integrity and inclinations of judges is a hot topic at dog shows, but one thing is clear: whatever their other

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biases, they favor terriers, which have won more than a third of all Best in Show prizes at Westminster.)

When Tomlinson first learns what it costs to be a serious contender in the dog-show world, he is so incredulous that he suspects the owners of having some kind of side hustle. "Surely," he writes, "they weren't spending hundreds of thousands of dollars a year just to prove that their Yorkshire terrier was better than everybody else's Yorkshire terrier." Actually, that's exactly what they are doing—and, if this seems crazy, bear in mind that it is different only in magnitude, not in kind, from what many regular dog owners do. Even middle-class families with mutts treat their pets like children these days, pushing them around in strollers and bringing them along to the grocery store. (In fairness, dog owners are not unique in this respect. According to the American Pet Products Association, twenty-four per cent of *reptile* owners regard their pet as "like a child.") Show-dog owners merely take the analogy further, treating their dogs not like any old children but like the kind of children who get private SAT tutors, one-on-one soccer coaching, and four years at an élite prep school.

It is easy to object to all this, of course. For one thing, some people take issue with dogs in general. As Tomlinson writes, "Most dogs are not great at first impressions," and, even if you can forgive the barking and crotch sniffing, they remain a pretty mixed bag of a species: noisy, destructive, oblivious to the notion of personal space, prone to shedding, prone to slobbering, and prone to biting, sometimes fatally. But dog people, too, might not enjoy dog shows; in fact, they may not enjoy them precisely because they are dog people. Many conscientious owners, together with the American Veterinary Medicine Association, oppose the custom of docking tails and cropping ears, practices that are still mandated in dozens of breed standards. And plenty of people object to the whole idea of purebred dogs, with good reason. Because all such dogs must trace their lineage to a small number of approved ancestors, their genetic pool is limited, leading to health problems and shorter life spans. The owners of French bulldogs, for instance, might find their dogs' flopped-out tongues and constant snoring adorable, but those traits reflect physiological distortions—small nostrils, narrow tracheas, elongated soft palates—that lead to terrible respiratory difficulties. Similarly, distortions in their lower bodies mean that most of them are born by Cesarean section, because otherwise birth can easily kill mothers and their babies. Oddly, these deformed creatures are now the most popular dog in America, an affinity Tomlinson diagnoses concisely: "They're the perfect dog for a sedentary society."

Still, it must be said on behalf of dog shows that they seem to be free from the rampant drug use—with all its attendant cruelties and fatalities—that characterizes horse racing, and that show dogs on the whole seem content and well treated. "I saw lots of stressed handlers and groomers," Tomlinson writes, "but I rarely saw a stressed show dog." Yet none of this quiets the feeling that, health concerns aside, dog shows are just a bit morally suspect—a little stuffy, a little prissy, a little undemocratic. It is a source of great annoyance to some people, for example, that no Labrador or golden retriever, two of America's best-loved dog breeds, has ever won Best in Show. As with movies, what pleases critics does not always please fans, and the audiences at dog shows can sometimes get a little unruly. As Tomlinson writes in the unimpeachable opening sentence of one chapter, "They booed the poodle."

It isn't hard to guess why: at shows devoted exclusively to purebreds, championing the Labs and goldens is as close as you can get to rooting for the Everyman. If you share my instinctive wariness of any situation that requires you to produce your papers, you could go to England, where the most famous dog show, Crufts, has spawned a counterpart, Scruffts, which is open to what are politely called "crossbreeds." Or you could just derive satisfaction from knowing that here in our own country, where our better angels are all lined up on the side of mutt-dom, such dogs are technically designated, by the A.K.C., "All American."

You get the sense, reading "Dogland," that Tomlinson's heart, too, lies with all things mixed and mongrel. "If you talk to a dog person," he writes, "eventually you're going to hear about their dog," and the most touching interlude in the book is an account of his own rescue mutt, Fred, whom he and his wife kept in the garage until they could fence in their yard—during which time the dog ate their Shop-Vac attachments, part of a five-gallon bucket, and their drywall. Nonetheless, Fred was soon sleeping in their bedroom.

Whatever Tomlinson's innate affections, though, he is mostly won over by the fancy, or at least inclined toward forbearance. He watches it bring people fulfillment—"I haven't had five bored minutes at a dog show in my life," one of Striker's owners says—and something more than that as well. At one point, he tells the story of Michelle Parris, an owner-handler he meets at a dog show, whose life fell apart after a series of tough blows in a few short years: an injury, an illness, a breakup, the death of a loved one. What put it back together again was Italian greyhounds. "She had to walk the dogs and feed them," Tomlinson writes. By the time he encounters her, the dogs have made her do pretty much everything a good therapist would have advised: get a routine that gets you out of bed in the morning; get outside; get a steady dose of something that feels like unconditional love, even if it is really some inscrutable canine equivalent.

This relationship between Parris and her greyhounds doesn't strike Tomlinson as atypical. He admires how well dogs adapt to our requirements, not only over the evolutionary timescale but over our own human lifetimes as well: "Do you need someone to protect a junkyard? Learn a circus act? Comfort a dying child? Dogs can do that." But most of all he marvels at their ability to take care of us. Dogs are remarkably attuned to our physical needs, able to assist disabled people and warn us of impending danger, not to mention detect and in some cases help patients manage a wide range of diseases, from epilepsy to lung cancer. In part through these acts of aid and attentiveness but also through their mere presence, they seem to demonstrate two qualities almost all of us crave—adoration and loyalty. Yet the crucial thing is not that they love us, or seem to, but the converse: they give us a way to love the world, our most important bulwark against despair. That makes all of them, not just the St. Bernards, rescue dogs—still showing up to save us, no matter how cold or dark or steep or scary it gets out there. ♦

BOOKS

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We used to think the rich had a social function. What are they good for now?

BY BENJAMIN WALLACE-WELLS

Anxieties about the influence of extreme wealth have a very long history.

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIANO PONZI

Around the start of the twenty-first century, the Oxford sociologist Jonathan Gershuny noticed a change in the way the privileged behaved: the leisure class that the economist Thorstein Veblen had described during the Gilded Age seemed no longer to exist. The farther up people were on the income ladder, the harder they worked. "Busyness," Gershuny concluded, was "the badge of honor for the new superordinate working class." These days, even the highest-profile billionaires tend to be a little grim-faced. Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos—they practice judo throws, but do they ever smile? Recently, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on the minting of a new mega-billionaire, the eighty-six-year-old Texas wildcatter Autry Stephens, who, in February, sold his company and its meticulously assembled Permian drilling rights for twenty-six billion dollars. Stephens had driven to his office every day for forty-five years, lately in an old Toyota Land Cruiser. Was he looking forward to enjoying his extraordinary gains? Not really—he would miss the grind. "There is certainly some sadness on my part," Stephens said.

Why work this hard? Doesn't a life of ease beckon? Aren't there polo ponies to raise? The traditional rationale is to provide comforts to those you love. "*Familia, id est substantia*," the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century southern-European jurists argued—in other words, the family is the patrimony. But, at Stephens's level, the logic dissolves. No family needs the twenty-sixth billion. In the early twentieth century, the Texas oil tycoon Haroldson L. Hunt, then one of the richest men in the world, remarked that, "for practical purposes, someone who has $200,000 a year is as well off as I am." As he explained, "Money's just a way of keeping score. It's the game that matters."

That game—the competition among the ultra-wealthy for influence, legacy, and fortune—came to seem somewhat more sinister after the Great Recession steepened social inequality. Following the lead of Thomas Piketty, whose "Capital in the Twenty-first Century" was published in 2013, some like-minded scholars probed the distant past, seeking to learn how deeply ingrained inequality had been in societies dissimilar to our own. "As Gods Among Men: A History of the Rich in the West" (Princeton), a new book by the Italian historian Guido Alfani, shares these scholars' political perspective and their emphasis on the extremely long arc. But Alfani is interested less in the patterns of inequality than in the assemblage, use, and justification of great fortunes. The anxieties about extreme wealth which have recently shaped public debate—regarding its influence on politics, the way it tests the reach of states, and the ethics of philanthropy and private investment—turn out to be extraordinarily old. The rich have confused the rest of us from the beginning. When, in northern Italy on the cusp of the Renaissance, something like the modern mogul emerged (urban, financial, ostensibly meritocratic), many members of society were "troubled by the very existence of the rich," Alfani writes. "Indeed, it would not be too far-fetched to state they did not know precisely what to do with them."

In the more recent past, the super-rich themselves often dealt with the social problems of wealth simply by declining to discuss them. "The only time a whale gets harpooned is when he surfaces," the reticent billionaire investor David Gottesman told the *Times* a decade ago. But lately whales have been surfacing everywhere. This past winter alone, the plutocrats Marc Rowan and Bill Ackman campaigned

very publicly to remove the presidents of Penn and Harvard, and the investor Jeffrey Yass sought to have the Republican Party reverse itself on the sale of TikTok, in which he had a stake. The defining billionaire of the moment is Elon Musk, not just because of his trolling presence on social media but because of his salvific ambitions. Projects such as Sam Bankman-Fried's cryptocurrency and effective-altruism initiatives, and Sam Altman's simultaneous warnings about and development of artificial intelligence, carry with them a similar imprint; for-profit maneuvers are described in the language of an encompassing idealism, as if those people in charge were envisioning not Q3 returns but the future of humanity itself.

As revelations of inequality have kept a spotlight on the wealthy, some of them, notably the heiress and philanthropist Abigail Disney, have argued for greater public giving. "It's taxes or pitchforks," a worried coalition wrote in an open letter released as the World Economic Forum convened in Davos in 2022. Those are the liberals; the more audible reaction has been a bristling insistence that the super-rich deserve their outsized fortune. "Our enemy is anti-merit, anti-ambition, anti-striving, anti-achievement, anti-greatness," Marc Andreessen wrote in his "Techno-Optimist Manifesto," widely applauded in Silicon Valley last fall. Speaking before the global élite at Davos this January, Javier Milei, the libertarian President of Argentina, declared, "Let no one tell you your ambition is immoral. . . . You are social benefactors. You are heroes." Musk himself tweeted an enthusiastic reply by way of a meme: a man having sex with an attractive woman stares at a laptop screen on which Milei is speaking.

Critics of the ultra-wealthy have tended to describe them with analogies from the animal kingdom—pigs at a trough, vampire squid. Alfani offers a gentler comparison. "They are like the pearl in the oyster: shiny indeed, and produced by the living body of the oyster, but at the same time somewhat extraneous to the organism," he writes. The question that animates his book also haunts our politics: What, exactly, do we want the rich to do, and how do we want them to be?

In the beginning, the job was to plunder and protect. Wealth lay in land, and in medieval Europe one amassed and held land by force of arms. In 1066, a Breton nobleman named Alan Rufus crossed the English Channel with his second cousin William the Conqueror, whose left flank he'd helped hold in a crucial battle. For this, he was granted a broad portfolio of lands in Cambridgeshire, many of which had belonged to the vanquished queen Edith the Fair. "But that was just the beginning of Rufus' path to immense wealth," Alfani writes. Soon, there was a rebellion in York, and Rufus was summoned to help suppress it, which he did in a brutal campaign that is thought to have killed as many as a hundred thousand people. The territories given to him grew and grew, until, Alfani reports, their net revenue may have exceeded seven per cent of England's. No Englishman has ever again controlled such a large share.

Within a couple of hundred years, however, the richest Europeans were increasingly emerging not from real estate but from commerce and finance. The epicenter was northern Italy, where the traders of the so-called commercial revolution had followed old Roman caravan routes into the Middle East, returning to Genoa, Ragusa, and Pisa laden with goods, and where innovative Italian bankers had developed double-entry bookkeeping, letters of credit, and bills of exchange, in part to help manage papal taxes flowing from across Christendom to the Vatican. When the English Crown fought the Hundred Years' War, it did so on credit extended by two Florentine family banks. When the Hapsburgs wanted to unify their empire, they contracted with Francesco Tasso of Bergamo to create a postal service; by the early sixteenth century, a package sent from Brussels could reach Innsbruck in five days.

These changes aroused the philosophers. Theologians emphasized the unnaturalness of finance: "*Nummus non parit nummos*," Thomas Aquinas insisted—money does not generate money. "As they approached their deathbeds, usury was not *a* but *the* sin on the minds of the wealthy," Tim Parks wrote in "Medici Money" (2006). Objections to the source of banking fortunes were intertwined with concerns about their scale. Nicole Oresme, an adviser to Charles V of France, argued, in the thirteen-seventies, that the rich ought to be banished to preserve the social balance in democratically governed cities: "The *superabundantes* are so unequal and exceed and overcome the others regarding their political power so much that it is reasonable to think that they are among the others as God is among men." In the letters that the Renaissance wealthy wrote one another, there are traces of anxiety that both God and the public might disapprove of what they are doing. An associate of the fantastically rich Florentine merchant Francesco Datini warns him against opening a bank, arguing that he will be disdained even if he leaves the bulk of his fortune to found a hospital for the poor, and that he will lose his *buona fama*—his good name.

The hinge figure in Alfani's history is Cosimo de' Medici, who offered one solution to the problem of the rich. The Rome branch of the Banco de Medici already held the Vatican's deposits when Cosimo took over the bank, in 1420, and he lent cautiously, married strategically, and expanded relentlessly. Parks writes, "Nothing in the history books gives us the sense of the man's ever having been young." In time, Cosimo antagonized the Florentine landowning dynasty headed by Rinaldo degli Albizzi, in part because of Cosimo's financial ties to rival Italian republics. When Cosimo opposed a war with the state of Lucca, which the Albizzi family had pushed for, Rinaldo angled to have Cosimo imprisoned and charged with treason, punishable by death, in 1433. Cosimo managed to have his sentence commuted to exile, and took his banking operations and his favorite architect, Michelozzo, to Venice, giving the city a monastery with a new library and building for himself a spectacular palazzo. Within a year, the Albizzi war proved disastrous, and Florence was in financial ruin. It was a good time

to have a phenomenal amount of cash. Cosimo agreed to pay off the Florentine war debt, and, as Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a century later, he was "hailed as the benefactor of the people and the father of his country."

During the next thirty years, Cosimo schemed and maneuvered, holding power, deflecting allegations that he was a sponsor of sodomites, and beheading his political enemies (including two cousins of Machiavelli's father). But he also endowed: he sponsored the Council of Florence, in 1438, to reconcile the Roman and Byzantine Churches, and he built the Platonic Academy and the Medici Library, likely the first public library in Renaissance Europe. Among his public-relations agents was the Tuscan scholar Poggio Bracciolini, once his tutor, whose view of the two roles the rich could play matched Cosimo's example. They could beautify the city through philanthropy, Poggio wrote, and they could supply "barns of money" to rescue it from a crisis. With their "abundant means to aid the sick, the weak, to benefit many in their needs," the rich were the "nervous system of the city." You couldn't function without them.

But the wealthy men of early modern Europe didn't act much like Poggio had envisioned. Florence was an exception, both in its republican politics and in its humanist splendor; great fortunes were still often made through ambition and cunning at court. The indebted sixteenth-century privateer Francisco Pizarro held the Incan emperor Atahualpa hostage for a ransom of eighty-five cubic metres of gold and twice as much silver (Atahualpa paid; Pizarro killed him anyway) and used the money to buy political influence in Spain and a South American empire for his brother. In the late seventeenth century, the French merchant Antoine Crozat won a place at court through his loans to the Crown; his sons exploited the position to make advantageous loans to other nobles, and eventually secured the Crown's monopoly on trade in the Louisiana Territory.

These were tempestuous centuries, with the social order regularly restructured, but Alfani seems little interested in political change, acknowledging the

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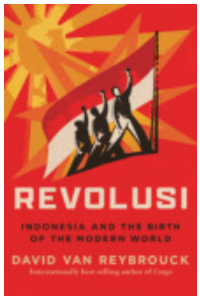
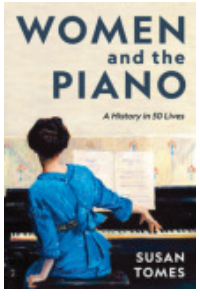
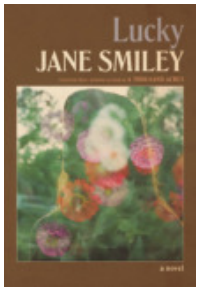


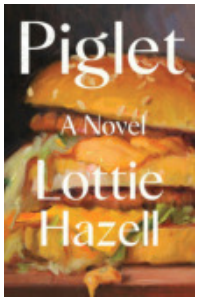
Revolusi, *by David Van Reybrouck (Norton)*. This powerful account of the colonization of Indonesia takes the form of a people's history, using interviews with those who lived under—and sometimes defied—Dutch rule. Van Reybrouck, a Belgian historian best known for his work about the Democratic Republic of the Congo, shows how the Dutch relied on genocide and slavery to piece together the Indonesian "jigsaw puzzle." As one colonist put it, "Trade cannot be maintained without war, nor war without trade." Van Reybrouck also captures the hope that independence brought, showing how, before a U.S.-sponsored dictatorship ushered in a "crazed explosion of violence," Indonesians' fight against oppression inspired other nations to break free.



Women and the Piano, *by Susan Tomes (Yale)*. In this engaging survey of fifty female pianists, from the eighteenth century to the present, Tomes aims to correct a male-centric understanding of piano history. Women pianists have long been scrutinized—for playing in a "masculine" style, for their appearances, for not orienting themselves around family. Through short biographies, Tomes documents the cost of pursuing art. Fanny Mendelssohn allowed her compositions to be published under her brother Felix's name; Zhu Xiao-Mei continued studying Bach even after being sent to do manual labor during China's Cultural Revolution. Yet the resounding note is one of passion. As Marguerite Long told her students, "My joy in life is work, because it will never betray you."



Lucky, *by Jane Smiley (Knopf)*. The main character of this warmhearted novel is Jodie Rattler, a girl who, at the age of six, accompanies her uncle to a racetrack and wins a roll of forty-three two-dollar bills. That talisman propels Rattler through life, from her upbringing in a gregarious family to a successful, if ultimately unfulfilling, career as a folk-rock singer-songwriter. As the novel wends its way from the nineteen-fifties to the near future, through multiple national crises—some historical, some speculative—Rattler contemplates the mixed blessings of her lifelong lucky streak and the contingencies inherent in "the great enigma . . . the sense you have, that comes and goes, of who you are, what a self is."



Piglet, *by Lottie Hazell (Henry Holt)*. Newly installed in a house in Oxford, the protagonist of this novel savors visions of a future with her well-to-do fiancé. To her relief, they are a world away from her family in Derby, for whom she feels "a crawling embarrassment," and from whom she received the nickname Piglet, for her prodigious appetite. Days before the wedding, however, her fiancé confesses a betrayal. Clinging to "the life she had so carefully built, so smugly shared," Piglet insists on moving forward with the marriage. But amid sensuous descriptions of her cooking and of the vast amounts of food she begins to order at restaurants, battles between self-denial and indulgence, external expectations and inner feeling, start to consume her. Each burger and croquembouche is freighted with meaning.

French Revolution and Karl Marx only in passing. He emphasizes instead the constant pattern of dynastic entrenchment. However much creativity and innovation were required to build the "massive number of wealthy dynasties" spawned during industrialization, he writes, those fortunes "often quickly took a different direction after the founders had passed away, for example, by pursuing politics and high office and/or merging with the nobility." Give the Musk and Andreessen families a single generation, his account suggests, and their fortunes will be no more justifiable than that of the rentiers—which could help explain why present-day billionaires so want to demonstrate how hard they are working. Historically, some of this entrenchment happened almost naturally. In eighteenth-century Holland, the riches that arrived following a broad colonial and commercial expansion entirely upended the economic order, whereupon the insurgents swiftly became oligarchs: within a generation, eighty-three per cent of Rotterdam's city councillors were a close relation of one another. At other times, the dynastic entrenchment was engineered. Of the eighteen marriages entered into by the grandchildren of Mayer Amschel Rothschild, sixteen were between an uncle and a niece or between first cousins.

That the politics of wealth are, irreducibly, the politics of inherited wealth was once much more obvious in Europe than in the United States. In 1910, a little more than half of the largest American fortunes derived primarily from inheritance, whereas in most European countries the figure was about seventy-five per cent. Then, after the shocks of the nineteen-thirties and the Second World War, those positions flipped. By the mid-twentieth century, the inheritance share of wealth was higher in the U.S. than in Europe. Perhaps because of the scale of fortunes that arose in America, or because of our explicitly democratic covenants, the rich here have tended to wrestle more directly with the contradictions of their position: There was the model of Andrew Carnegie, exploiting his workers while worrying over the possibility of a "rigid caste" system and establishing public libraries to help alleviate it. Then, there was Jay Gould, who denied that there was anything to apologize for, and forwent philanthropy in favor of building a railroad empire and marrying his daughter into the French nobility. What, really, are the rich supposed to do with their fortunes? They can spend their money lavishly, which everyone agrees is profligate and gross. Or they can save it, which deepens inequality and is probably worse. "Whatever they do, the rich attract criticism," Alfani writes.

In the case of the robber barons, it took until 1907 for that criticism to break their system. The immediate cause was a failed effort by a trio of Montana magnates to corner the market on copper; when their position was exposed, there was a run on one of the banks that had backed them, the third largest trust on Wall Street, which soon collapsed. Very quickly, the brokerages and banks linked to the principals in the copper escapade came under threat, too. J. P. Morgan convened a coalition of the wealthy who plowed in their own cash to stop the run and perhaps saved the banking system. He had repeated Cosimo's trick. But this time the public was appalled at the influence that a few plutocrats could have. After some antagonistic hearings, a progressive Congress created the Federal Reserve. Henceforth, the "barns of money" would be much larger, and everyone would contribute, not just the ultra-wealthy. Since the Renaissance, the rich had had two roles. Now they were down to one: charity.

In the past generation, the ranks of the super-rich have grown dramatically. Between 1990 and 2020, the number of billionaires in the U.S. increased ninefold. In China, the growth of the super-wealthy has been more explosive still: in a single year, between 2020 and 2021, that country's billionaire count grew by sixty per cent. Private fortunes of this scale are fundamentally transnational and less moored to individual nations that might make demands of them. Consultancies now track the movement of high-net-worth individuals across borders—almost eleven thousand left China in 2022 alone. If the twenty-tens were the decade of tax offshoring, the twenty-twenties are the era of the Singapore family office: private-investment-and-philanthropy hubs for vast fortunes.

Progressives, for much of the past century, have seen the problem of wealth through the lens of redistribution: what they want of the rich is that they pay their fair share. Taxes "are the proper way (institutionally and culturally) for the rich to contribute to society," Alfani concludes. "Not giving, but taxes." This can seem a little quaint and unadventurous. But, in this jittery, politically tenuous post-pandemic period, the sentiment has weakened. Throughout the pandemic, at a time when public resources were under strain, and aggressive emergency aid for the poor made for an immediate reduction to inequality, no advanced economy (with the exception of Spain) meaningfully raised taxes on the rich.

The idea that the rich could have a role as a class is more than a little antiquated. Jeff Bezos and Abigail Disney have very different abilities, powers, and insights; we shouldn't want them to do the same thing. But Alfani's observation that the rich as a group have no clear social function is borne out by the fact that, in the Musk era, they have reacted to populist pressures largely by justifying their fortunes as individuals. When they maintain a combative social-media presence, fixate on meritocracy, employ idealistic language to describe for-profit enterprises, and draw attention to their heroic personal labors, the aim isn't to rationalize concentrations of wealth generally but to defend one pile of wealth specifically. The class consciousness of our tycoons is fragile.

The threat that fortunes of such size inherently pose to democracy rightly preoccupies Alfani, though he comes to no firm conclusion about it. At the moment, the number of great fortunes and the difficulty of balancing their interests have made it difficult for an individual billionaire to exert influence over the rest. (The donations of the super-wealthy to the Republican and Democratic parties, for instance, roughly cancel each other out.) But that could change, which leaves the rest of us, and the legacy of the anti-inequality movement, in an anxious and contingent position. Instead of fighting a class war against the rich, we now find ourselves swimming with whales. ♦

FORGET IT

A neuropsychologist says that we're thinking about memory all wrong.

BY JEROME GROOPMAN

Research shows that what we call "memory" is a web of interrelated functions.

Four times a year, I attend the Yizkor service at synagogue. Yizkor in Hebrew denotes "remembrance," and the official name of the service, Hazkarat Neshamot, means a "remembering of souls." During the service, I call to mind loved ones who have died—parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, close friends—reliving shared times that were cherished, and some that were fraught. I think about what I learned from these people, several of whom were in my life from my first moments of awareness. I recall being taught to swim by my father, hearing my pious Russian grandmother's tearful account of the Kishinev pogrom, standing by my father's bedside as a medical student in an underequipped community hospital as he suffered a fatal heart attack. The Yizkor service at my synagogue ends with the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, and with a call to perform deeds of loving-kindness in memory of the departed.

Many religions and cultures have rituals structured around remembrance, a fact that suggests how central the ability to remember is to our sense of self, both as individuals and as communities. But how accurate are our memories, and in what ways do they truly shape us? And why does some of what we remember come to us easily, even unbidden, while other things remain maddeningly just out of reach, seeming to slip even further away the more we struggle to summon them?

In "Why We Remember" (Doubleday), Charan Ranganath, a neuropsychologist at U.C. Davis, writes that the question he always gets when he mentions that he studies memory is "Why am I so forgetful?" The title of his book is a riposte to this, a suggestion that it's the wrong question to be asking. "The problem isn't your memory, it's that we have the wrong expectations for what memory is for in the first place," he writes. "The mechanisms of memory were not cobbled together to help us remember the name of that guy we met at that thing."

It has never been easier to fact-check our memories against an external record and find ourselves lacking, but Ranganath is intent on giving us a new way of understanding memory. He tracks how ideas about the phenomenon have developed in the course of more than a century of scientific inquiry, and lays out the state of current research. In common with many researchers studying cognition and behavior, he takes a broadly evolutionary view. "The various mechanisms that contribute to memory have evolved to meet the challenges of survival." It's easy enough to imagine how being able to retain knowledge about food sources or particular dangers could be lifesaving for our ancestors—"which berries were poisonous, which people were most likely to help or betray them," as Ranganath puts it. But thinking of memory as an adaptive trait has a less obvious and perhaps more interesting corollary: "Viewed through this lens, it is apparent that what we often see as the flaws of memory are also its features." In the right circumstances, apparently, forgetting has been useful, too.

The earliest scientist in Ranganath's account is the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, who, in the late nineteenth century, attempted to put the study of memory on an objective footing by quantifying its effects. Acting as his own experimental subject, he set about seeing how much data he could remember with a given amount of study. The test he used, chosen for its lack of prior associations, was a welter of meaningless three-letter syllables. Ebbinghaus found that he could memorize sixty-four of these pseudo-words in forty-five minutes before becoming exhausted. However, when he measured his retention, he observed that he had

ILLUSTRATION BY MAGALI CAZO

forgotten nearly half the words after twenty minutes. Graphing the rate at which information was lost, he came up with the so-called forgetting curve, a concept that is still influential—for instance, in the design of spaced-repetition learning tools. The forgetting curve starts out steep—a huge amount of information vanishes within sixty minutes—and levels off over several days. As Ranganath notes, "Much of what you are experiencing right now will be lost in less than a day."

Ebbinghaus's experiment drew a sharp line between remembering and forgetting, but, a generation later, Frederic Bartlett, a psychologist at the University of Cambridge, showed that the situation is more complicated. Not only do we fail to remember much of what happens to us; even things we remember are often wrong. In a famous experiment, volunteers were told a Native American folk tale called "War of the Ghosts," selected because it contained cultural details that would be alien to British students. Later, the students recalled the core of the tale but replaced some details with more culturally familiar ones. Instead of words such as "canoe" and "paddle," they recalled "boat" and "oar"; they replaced "seal hunting" with "fishing."

From these results, Bartlett concluded that memories are not a simple record of the past but, rather, an "imaginative reconstruction," in which retrieved information is fleshed out with preëxisting knowledge to compose a story that feels coherent to us. With repeated acts of recall, Ranganath later writes, further alterations creep in, making the memory "like a copy of a copy of a copy, increasingly blurry and susceptible to distortions." Subsequent research has borne out Bartlett's insight about the imaginative nature of memory, showing that the neural circuits associated with imagination are active during the act of remembering. Ranganath guides us through the roles of various brain regions, particularly the hippocampus and parts of the prefrontal cortex, and describes some research of his own, which has helped demonstrate the role of the perirhinal cortex in imparting a sense of familiarity. (Notably, this sense can sometimes be triggered even when we are presented with something unfamiliar, leading us to experience déjà vu.)

The picture that emerges is one in which what we call "memory" is less a single thing than a web of interrelated functions. Emotion plays a significant role, particularly in the retrieval of "episodic memories." The term was used in 1972 by an Estonian-born Canadian psychologist named Endel Tulving, who drew a distinction between two kinds of memory, episodic and semantic. Episodic memory happens when we recall experiences. Semantic memory is the retrieval of discrete facts or knowledge that isn't reliant on summoning the experiential context in which the information was learned. Tulving wrote that episodic memory amounted to a form of "mental time travel," as we enter a state of consciousness similar to the one we were in when the memories were stored.

Marcel Proust's episodic memory, famously, was triggered by the smell of madeleines. Taste can function in a similar way and, as Ranganath writes, so can music. He also speculates that nostalgia has its roots in episodic memory. According to him, research shows that, on average, people find it easier to recollect positive rather than negative memories, and this bias increases as we age. He even thinks that this "might explain older adults' penchant for nostalgia." But I wonder, too, whether nostalgia might have to do with the vicissitudes of the aging process, which may prompt us to recall wistfully the vitality of youth rather than the onset of arthritis in our hips or the formation of cataracts.

How can such an apparently haphazard system confer an advantage on us as a species? The answer starts to come into focus when Ranganath writes about attempts to make certain machine-learning models simulate the way that human brains learn. As information is fed in, the model gradually builds up a body of knowledge about a given area. Ranganath provides a hypothetical example:

> "An eagle is a bird. It has feathers, wings, and a beak, and it flies."
>
> "A crow is a bird. It has feathers, wings, and a beak, and it flies."
>
> "A hawk is a bird. It has feathers, wings, and a beak, and it flies."

Soon, he explains, the system will be able to use the examples it has been taught to deduce that a seagull, say, can fly. But it has problems making sense of information that doesn't fit the pattern, such as "A penguin is a bird. It has feathers, wings, and a beak, and it *swims*." Exceptions to the rule can cause what is known as "catastrophic interference," in which learning the new piece of information causes the model to forget what it had previously learned. Overcoming this weakness requires training the computer on colossal amounts of data.

People, by contrast, take such contradictions in stride, something that Ranganath attributes to our ability to toggle between semantic and episodic memory. The general rule is stored in semantic memory, whereas episodic memory, not being designed to draw universals from across our experience, organizes events in a more idiosyncratic manner. The result is that our brains are much quicker to adjust to the real world. "They are wonderfully adapted to make use of the past, given the dynamic and unpredictable world in which we have evolved," Ranganath writes. "The world around us is constantly changing, and it's critical to update our memories to reflect these changes."

Once we see memory as a dynamic phenomenon, rather than as a passive record, it becomes possible to understand how forgetting can also serve a purpose. "Forgetting isn't a failure of memory; it's a consequence of processes that allow our brains to prioritize information that helps us navigate and make sense of the world," Ranganath writes. (It's when we forget the wrong things, of course, that we get frustrated.) In certain circumstances, forgetting can even be part of the memorization process, and Ranganath spends a good deal of time on the power of "error-driven learning." It seems that pushing our memory to failure can produce exactly the sort of salient experience that will then fix a piece of information in our mind.

Ranganath quotes Bartlett to the effect that "literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant" and makes clear that his book is "not a book about 'how to remember everything.'" Nonetheless, an account of how memory works can hardly avoid giving a few tips. He advises us to think of our memories as

"like a desk cluttered with crumpled-up scraps of paper. If you'd scribbled your online banking password on one of those scraps of paper, it will take a good deal of effort and luck to find it." The key is to attach important memories to something distinctive, the equivalent of a "hot-pink Post-It note." A related strategy is the memory-palace technique, in which one visualizes units of information as being arranged in a space that is already familiar, such as one's childhood bedroom.

Perhaps the most useful tactic in memorization is "chunking," a phenomenon identified by the pioneering mid-century cognitive psychologist George A. Miller. Miller noted how hard it was for us to hold more than a few pieces of information in our head simultaneously; he thought that it was impossible to keep more than seven things in mind at once, but subsequent research suggests that the situation is even worse and that the maximum is probably even lower. Fortunately, there's what Ranganath calls a "huge loophole": our brains are very flexible about what constitutes a single piece of information. A simple example is the way we remember telephone numbers. Breaking a ten-digit U.S. phone number into two groups of three plus a group of four reduces the number of "items" to be remembered from ten to three. At a larger scale, the most talented soccer or basketball players are able to "read" complicated arrangements of other players as single pieces of information. Likewise, many chess masters can take in the places of pieces on a board at a glance, because they are remembering not individual pieces on individual squares but larger patterns, based on their accumulated knowledge of the game. Tellingly, if the pieces are arranged randomly rather than having arisen out of actual gameplay, a chess master's advantage in memorizing the position is dramatically reduced.

Toward the end of his book, Ranganath expands his focus from the individual to examine the social aspect of memory. He cites a startling analysis of casual conversation which found that forty per cent of the time we spend talking to one another is taken up with storytelling of some kind. Whether spilling our entire past or just quickly catching up, we are essentially engaged in exchanging memories. It should come as no surprise that communication renders our memories even more fungible. "The very act of sharing our past experiences can significantly change what we remember and the meaning we derive from it," Ranganath writes, and distortions multiply with each telling.

Another pioneering experiment by Frederic Bartlett examined the distortions that occur in "serial reproduction"—or what we would call a game of telephone. Bartlett showed student volunteers a drawing of an African shield and then had them redraw it from memory. He gave these drawings to another group of volunteers and asked the fresh volunteers to reproduce the new drawings from memory. As he repeated the process with group after group, he found not only that the results looked less and less like an African shield but also that they started to resemble a man's face. Collectively, the volunteers were changing something unfamiliar into something familiar. More recent work on such serial distortions has shown that, over several iterations, elements of a story that fit common stereotypes get reinforced and elements that don't fall away.

The psychologist Henry L. Roediger III has adopted the term "social contagion" to describe such memory distortions. He conducted an experiment in which pairs of people were given a set of photos and asked to recall what they remembered from the pictures. However, only one individual in each pair was a true volunteer; the other had been planted with instructions to deliberately "recall" things that were not in the photos. The actual volunteers became "infected" by the misinformation, often themselves remembering items that hadn't been in the pictures at all. Furthermore, the effect persisted even if they were warned of the possibility that their partner's recollections might be mistaken.

Our openness to influence and the tendency of serial reproduction to magnify social biases have dispiriting political implications. "Once distortions creep into our shared narratives, they can be incredibly difficult to root out," Ranganath writes. It's no wonder that conspiracy theories—about the 2020 election being stolen, about Barack Obama being born in Kenya—prove so resistant to repeated debunking. It also turns out that groups are disproportionately swayed by dominant members who speak confidently. Ranganath offers a crumb of comfort. Research shows that diverse groups remember more accurately than homogenous ones do, and that groups also remember more fully if a wide range of group members contribute to discussion and if contributions from less powerful members are actively encouraged.

The term "collective memory" was established not by a psychologist but by the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, in a book published in 1925. Halbwachs saw shared memories as a key factor in group identity and explored how the same events might be recalled differently by people of different social classes or different religions. (As it happens, he converted from Catholicism to Judaism, and died in Buchenwald; some of his work on memory was published posthumously.) When I call to mind my forebears during the Yizkor service, I am enacting a sense of my place within my immediate family, the wider Jewish community, the medical profession, and American society as a whole. "We come to terms with the past in order to make sense of the present," Ranganath writes, and memory shapes "everything from our perceptions of reality to the choices and plans we make, to the people we interact with, and even to our identity."

This is true—in part. But certain past experiences, especially those of early childhood, shape us even though they are not quite remembered and instead reside in what we call the subconscious. Our memories certainly contribute to our identities, but so does their silent counterpart, the huge subliminal substrate of everything that we have forgotten. To attribute all that we are to memory bypasses what is forgotten but not lost. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Zemlinsky, Schulhoff, and other neglected Jewish composers of Central Europe.

BY ALEX ROSS

Zemlinsky, once regarded as a weak-willed eclecticist, is attracting new admirers.

Alexander Zemlinsky, who composed several of the most subtly entrancing operas of the early twentieth century, embodied the cosmopolitan chaos of the old Austrian Empire. His father came from a Slovakian Catholic family; his mother was a Sarajevo native of Sephardic Jewish and Muslim descent. Born in Vienna in 1871, Zemlinsky apprenticed there under Gustav Mahler; had an illustrious stint conducting at the New German Theatre, in Prague; and later landed at the radical-minded Kroll Opera, in Berlin. His mature works draw, variously, on Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Rabindranath Tagore, and Langston Hughes. To what nation or tradition does such a polymorphous figure belong? A sorcerer of orchestration, Zemlinsky wrote music that glimmers ambiguously in the air, and his life seemed to do the same.

In April, I went to Prague for the final installment of a four-year series called Musica Non Grata, which focussed on German-speaking Jewish composers who thrived in the First Czechoslovak Republic, between 1918 and 1938. The principal venue was the Prague State Opera, as the New German Theatre is now known. The German government provided support, memorializing the Germanophone culture that once flourished in Czech lands. Two of Zemlinsky's operas, "A Florentine Tragedy" and "Kleider Machen Leute" ("Clothes Make the Man"), were presented on the final Musica Non Grata weekend. As it happens, I had recently seen Zemlinsky's "Der Zwerg" ("The Dwarf") at L.A. Opera, whose music director, James Conlon, is a tireless advocate of composers who lost their careers—and sometimes their lives—to the Nazis.

Efforts to recuperate artists who were victims of prejudice might be seen as special pleading. Would the music of the historically oppressed—whether the composers are Jewish, Black, or female—compel our attention if we knew nothing of their struggles? Aren't we rewriting history to compensate for past misdeeds? Such questions suffer from the dubious assumption that the core repertory has emerged from a purely organic process unaffected by sentimental factors. Consider how the cult of Mozart dwells on his early death, or how that of Beethoven emphasizes his deafness. In any case, no revival of a forgotten composer can be rooted in anything but love, and Zemlinsky's circle of devotees, while not exactly vast, is steadily expanding.

His musical gifts were never in doubt. Recordings of his work as a conductor are meagre, but his contemporaries praised him as an expert, elegant interpreter of modern and classic repertory alike. Igor Stravinsky, not one to hand out compliments freely, recalled a Zemlinsky-led performance of "The Marriage of Figaro" as the "most satisfying operatic experience of my life." In Prague, Zemlinsky selflessly promoted not only his fellow-Viennese, like his brother-in-law Arnold Schoenberg and members of the Schoenberg school, but also Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, and Weill. Having begun as an acolyte of Brahms, Zemlinsky brushed against atonality, neoclassicism, and popular song. His openness to myriad influences caused him to be perceived as a weak-willed eclecticist. But Theodor W. Adorno, in a beautiful defense of Zemlinsky's music, questioned the belief that "force is an integral part of greatness," arguing that there is genius in sensitivity, empathy, and reticence.

"Der Zwerg" (1919-21), an adaptation of Wilde's story "The Birthday of the Infanta," has long been the most often performed of Zemlinsky's eight operas.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROMY BLÜMEL

I had previously seen productions at the Spoleto Festival, in 1993, and at the Komische Oper, in Berlin, in 2002. The story, in which a dwarf falls in love with a cruelly teasing princess, has autobiographical dimensions: throughout his life, Zemlinsky felt like a freakish outsider. In 1900, he became smitten with the composer Alma Schindler, who found him at once "horribly ugly" and "touchingly sweet." (She dropped him in favor of Mahler, who was neither.) The omnipresence of antisemitism in Vienna must have shadowed the opera's conception.

The central conceit of "Der Zwerg" is that the title character, having never seen himself in a mirror, considers himself irresistible. The score tells us that he is, in fact, right; whereas the Princess's music is dry and brittle, the Dwarf is given the opera's most beguiling motif—a lush, wistful theme winding its way languidly through D-minor, B-flat-minor, and F-sharp-minor tonalities. In Los Angeles, the tenor Rodrick Dixon, who has made a specialty of the title role, brought to bear the right mixture of lyric and heroic elements; Conlon handled Zemlinsky's chiaroscuro textures with absolute authority. William Grant Still's one-act opera "Highway 1, USA," a noirish mid-century tale couched in a late-Romantic idiom, made for an apt companion.

"A Florentine Tragedy" (1915-16), which the Prague State Opera presented in a concert performance, is another Wilde adaptation: a deliciously nasty story of Renaissance revenge, in which a merchant renews his relationship with his unfaithful wife after killing her lover. To whip up erotic hurly-burly, Zemlinsky borrows heavily from Strauss's "Salome," but his refined techniques of motivic development hark back to Brahms. When the merchant enters, stepwise descending figures slither in the bass; these are echoed triumphantly in the final bars, in a strange anticipation of the ending of Olivier Messiaen's "La Nativité du Seigneur." The baritone Joachim Goltz delivered a caustic, vividly detailed portrayal of the merchant; Karsten Januschke set an urgent pace in the pit.

Although Zemlinsky is now best known for the sumptuous decadence of his Wilde operas—and for the kindred atmosphere of orchestral scores like "Die Seejungfrau" and the "Lyrische Symphonie"—he also had a flair for urbane social comedy. "Kleider Machen Leute," completed in 1909 and revised in 1921, rests on a premise of fable-like simplicity: when small-town residents mistake a travelling tailor's apprentice for a Polish count, confusion and scandal ensue. Zemlinsky fills his score with terse lyricism, adroitly managed ensembles, phantasmagoric instrumentation, and an undertow of terminal melancholy. The production, by Jetske Mijnssen, was minimalist to excess, but Richard Hein, the conductor, and a fresh-sounding cast filled out the picture. In the same period, Strauss was trying to emulate Mozart in "Der Rosenkavalier"; Zemlinsky, with his matchless stylistic agility, came closer to the goal.

In 1938, Zemlinsky fled into exile, a sick and broken man. He died four years later in the suburbs of New York, his achievements largely forgotten. Others met far worse fates. One day in the Czech Republic, I joined the German musicologist Kai Hinrich Müller and other participants in Musica Non Grata on an expedition to Terezín, or Theresienstadt, northwest of Prague. Here, between 1941 and 1945, the Nazis established a ghetto for tens of thousands of Central European Jews, and for propaganda purposes they permitted a modest flourishing of cultural life. Among many wrenching documents at the Terezín Memorial is a meticulously notated bracket for a table-tennis tournament. Composers active in the camp included Viktor Ullmann, Pavel Haas, Hans Krása, Gideon Klein, and Lena Stein-Schneider. All but the last were killed in Auschwitz. Musica Non Grata organized a moving performance of Stein-Schneider's "Goldhärchen," a tuneful fairy-tale entertainment that she wrote after the war. The audience was a group of child cancer patients at Motol University Hospital, in Prague.

During my Czech visit, I also had the chance to hear music by Erwin Schulhoff, one of the most fascinating and uncategorizable personalities of the between-the-wars period. Born in Prague in 1894, Schulhoff received Dvořák's blessing in his youth and later immersed himself in Debussy and Strauss. After the First World War, he discovered jazz and went through a boisterous Dadaist period: in his "Sonata Erotica," for solo voice, the singer feigns an orgasm, and in his piano suite "Fünf Pittoresken" the performer executes a movement consisting entirely of rests, decades in advance of John Cage. More soberly, Schulhoff wrote several magnificent chamber pieces for strings, which owe debts to Bartók but possess their own eerie, moonlit allure. In the thirties, Schulhoff began producing martial works on Communist themes. His musical setting of "The Communist Manifesto" kicks off with a slinky, bouncy, almost danceable treatment of the line "A spectre is haunting Europe."

Several days after the Zemlinsky mini-festival in Prague, the Brno Philharmonic presented Schulhoff's Second Symphony, which adheres to the neoclassical mode that spread far and wide during the interwar period. It is a minor masterpiece of Bauhaus bustle, stocked with curt tunes and charged with pert rhythm. Dennis Russell Davies, who once led adventurous seasons with the much missed Brooklyn Philharmonic, presided over a deft, characterful performance. The program also included the Symphony in F-Sharp by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who was born in Brno, in an apartment building that can be seen from the concert hall. Unfortunately, Davies marred the overpowering Adagio movement by imposing a substantial cut. There is no point in reviving neglected composers if one does not believe in them fully.

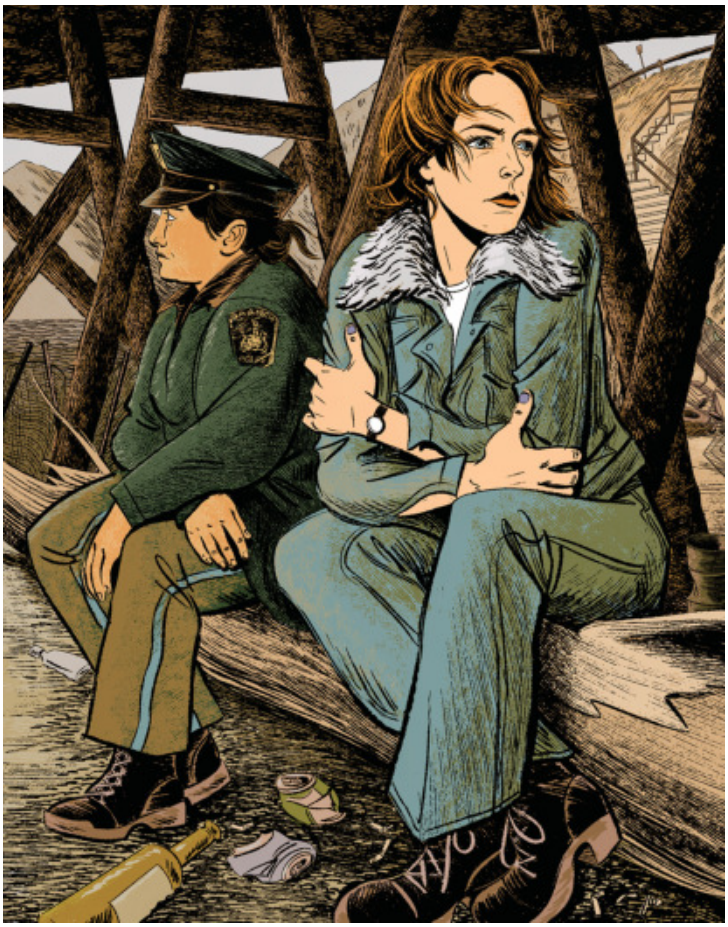
When the Czechoslovak Republic fell to the Nazis, Schulhoff made plans to immigrate to the Soviet Union. Just before his departure, however, he was arrested and sent to the Wülzburg concentration camp, in Bavaria. The commandant in Wülzburg treated prisoners with a modicum of humanity, and Schulhoff was excused from some work duties and allowed to compose—just as Messiaen, in the Stalag VIIIA camp, in Görlitz, was given time and space to write the "Quartet for the End of Time." Schulhoff set about sketching an Eighth Symphony, which would have contained a belligerent chorus in praise of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. He died of tuberculosis in August, 1942, five months after Zemlinsky breathed his last. Both composers seemed destined for oblivion, but their music sings beyond the sadness of their end. ♦

ON TELEVISION

BLAME GAME

"Baby Reindeer" and "Under the Bridge."

BY INKOO KANG



When Donny Dunn (Richard Gadd), the protagonist of the autobiographical Netflix sensation "Baby Reindeer," recalls the act of kindness toward a stranger that would come to derail his life, his initial explanation is deceptively simple: "I felt sorry for her." Donny is a fledgling comedian in his late twenties, tending bar at a London pub to make ends meet. Martha (Jessica Gunning) is a heavyset, middle-aged frump who claims to be a high-powered lawyer but simultaneously insists that a cup of tea is beyond her means. Donny—maybe amused, maybe intrigued, definitely pitying—gives her one on the house. She becomes a regular and, after finding his e-mail address on his personal Web site, inundates him with dozens of missives a day, many of them brimming with lust and misspellings. She follows him home and to his gigs. Her convictions about their relationship—first and foremost the belief that they're in one—are pure delusion. But Martha also senses a truth about Donny that no one else does. Early on, she asks, "Somebody hurt you, didn't they?"

In the seven-part series—a half-hour drama that can be hard to watch despite, and at times because of, its protagonist's hard-won forthrightness—Donny becomes a Dante of his own broken psyche, tracing his descent into abject self-loathing. The stalking is only the first circle of Hell. His real torment is the onslaught of painful memories triggered by Martha's pursuit. Some years prior, Donny had met one of his comedy heroes, a fiftysomething TV writer named Darrien (Tom Goodman-Hill), who presented himself as a Sherpa to the industry's summit. A flashback episode traces how the two men became enmeshed in a drug-fuelled "collaboration" that, in retrospect, seems designed to enable Darrien's predations. One of the show's most haunting images is that of Donny covering his own mouth in an effort not to scream as Darrien sexually assaults him. A scream would be tantamount to an accusation, and he can't afford to alienate his best hope of professional success.

In the present, convinced that his encounters with Darrien have "shifted" his desires, Donny treats his own orientation as a riddle to solve. His misery helps to explain his passivity toward Martha, whom he's loath to report to the police, even as she exhibits increasingly violent behavior; for all her volatility, she sees him the way he wants to be seen. Her jealous antics also provide him with a reason to distance himself from Teri (Nava Mau), a trans woman Donny is at once enamored of and embarrassed by, terrified that he'll be outed as anything but a cisgender man seeking cis women. In his shaky internal logic, Martha's public advances burnish his heterosexuality while his private romance with Teri threatens it.

On one level, the show functions as a case study in why male survivors of abuse so rarely come forward: the police don't take Donny's complaints seriously, and his loutish co-workers see Martha's overtures as a source of amusement. But the series goes further in illustrating how survivors need not be "perfect victims" to merit empathy, and in showing how dizzying the aftermath of such a violation can be. Blessed with neither street smarts nor a strong sense of self-preservation, Donny makes mistake after mistake, first in trying to deny what he later identifies as grooming, then in his attempts to ward off Martha. His long silence—and consequent inability to address his trauma—blights nearly all his relationships, until his pain comes rushing out, mid-comedy set, in

"Under the Bridge" pointedly resists the conventions of the whodunnit.

ILLUSTRATION BY WESLEY ALLSBROOK

a fit of compulsive logorrhea. The result, like most of Donny's standup, is more mortifying than funny.

In real life, Gadd exorcised these demons with greater premeditation: his high-concept one-man shows about both experiences were hits at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. "Baby Reindeer" sidesteps some ethical questions with its comparatively helpless, almost unwitting hero—the implication, for example, that his indulgence of Martha is unrelated to the material she can provide rings a bit hollow, given that Gadd has constructed a TV series with her as the hook. But there's catharsis to be found in the clarity with which Donny recounts what happened to him, and in his readiness to acknowledge both his missteps and the depths of his fascination. Rather than vilify his stalker, he deliberately teases out the parallels between them, showing how easily a moment of vulnerability—or of validation—can spiral into obsession. In doing so, he brings narrative cohesion to the chaos, producing a tightly controlled confessional that forges an almost too close bond with the viewer—and illuminates the dark, strange paths that shame can trick us into taking.

The very human messiness of attempting to apportion blame also drives the new Hulu crime drama "Under the Bridge." The limited series is based on the real-life murder of a fourteen-year-old Indian Canadian girl named Reena Virk, in 1997, but it's pointedly not a whodunnit—the circumstances of the beating by her peers that preceded her death, and the culprit who dealt the final blow, are revealed surprisingly swiftly. The show's true interest lies in the trial that follows, and in the dynamic between the girls from a local group home, called the Bic Girls for their perceived disposability, and the uncool, middle-class, tragically impressionable Reena (Vritika Gupta). Some days, she's in with the Bic Girls; other days, she couldn't be more on the outs. Her frenemies are quickly implicated in her killing, and the suspense derives from who'll be judged most responsible—an answer that hangs almost entirely on how much adult support each teen can rely on, and whom it's easiest for the police and the prosecutor to spin a story around.

"Under the Bridge" is adapted from a book by Rebecca Godfrey, who stumbled upon the investigation after returning to her home town of Victoria, British Columbia, around the time of Reena's disappearance. The series creator, Quinn Shephard, inserts a version of the author, who died shortly before filming, into the story; the fictionalized Rebecca is played by a disaffected, chain-smoking Riley Keough, styled like grunge-era Winona Ryder. Rebecca is writing a book nebulously centered on the town's "misunderstood girls" until Reena's case becomes its sole focus. Talking to an old friend (Lily Gladstone), a policewoman probing the "schoolgirl murder," she expresses the hope of producing something in the vein of Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood." The comparison isn't flattering. Like Capote, Rebecca gets overly attached to one of the suspects, a baby-faced gangster named Warren (Javon Walton), who reminds her of her long-dead brother. Rebecca, still youthful enough to pass herself off as a college student, identifies too closely with the teens on the margins—minutes after she's introduced, she's sitting cross-legged on a girl's bed, offering her a cigarette. The eschewal of journalistic distance gets her sources to talk; it also prevents her from evaluating their testimony clearly.

The show's incessant leaps back and forth in time and exhaustive exposition, including an episode dedicated to the history of Reena's family and their immigration to Canada, leave it feeling bloated and occasionally preachy. But, with a soundtrack of Nirvana and the Notorious B.I.G., the project is also enlivened by a distinctly nineties verve. The spirit of the era is best embodied by Jo (a pitch-perfect Chloe Guidry), a Bic Girl who sports barrettes, crop tops, pencil brows, and a heart-shaped locket that holds a photo of her idol, the mafioso John Gotti. Her callow bravado—fuelled, perhaps, by a turbulent home life that we learn just enough about—renders her both naïve and vicious; the series is built on a bone-deep understanding of how dopey and dangerous adolescent girls can be, often in the same breath. Jo, the ringleader, puts out a cigarette between Reena's eyes, in a mock bindi, on the night of her death. That act of racial othering may have encouraged her accomplices—the group was eventually known as the Shoreline Six—to see Reena as even more expendable than they were. To make sense of the tragedy, Rebecca reaches for the gothic, comparing it to a fairy tale. Such stories, she says, are about "girls punished for selfishness—or for no reason at all." ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Kaamran Hafeez, must be received by Sunday, May 19th. The finalists in the May 6th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 3rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

.....

THE FINALISTS

“Oh, sure, now you look at a map.”
Nick Heer, Calgary, Alberta

“Do you think death rays would be considered electronics or sporting goods?”
Mark Strout, Norwell, Mass.

“Wait—was it ‘conquer the mall’ or ‘conquer them all’?”
Andrew Welhouse, Salt Lake City, Utah

THE WINNING CAPTION

“The seller isn't willing to come down.”
Daniel Galef, Cincinnati, Ohio

WIRED

BASED ON THE WIRED COVER STORY BY JASON PARHAM

ONYX COLLECTIVE

BLACK TWITTER:

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

MAY 9 hulu

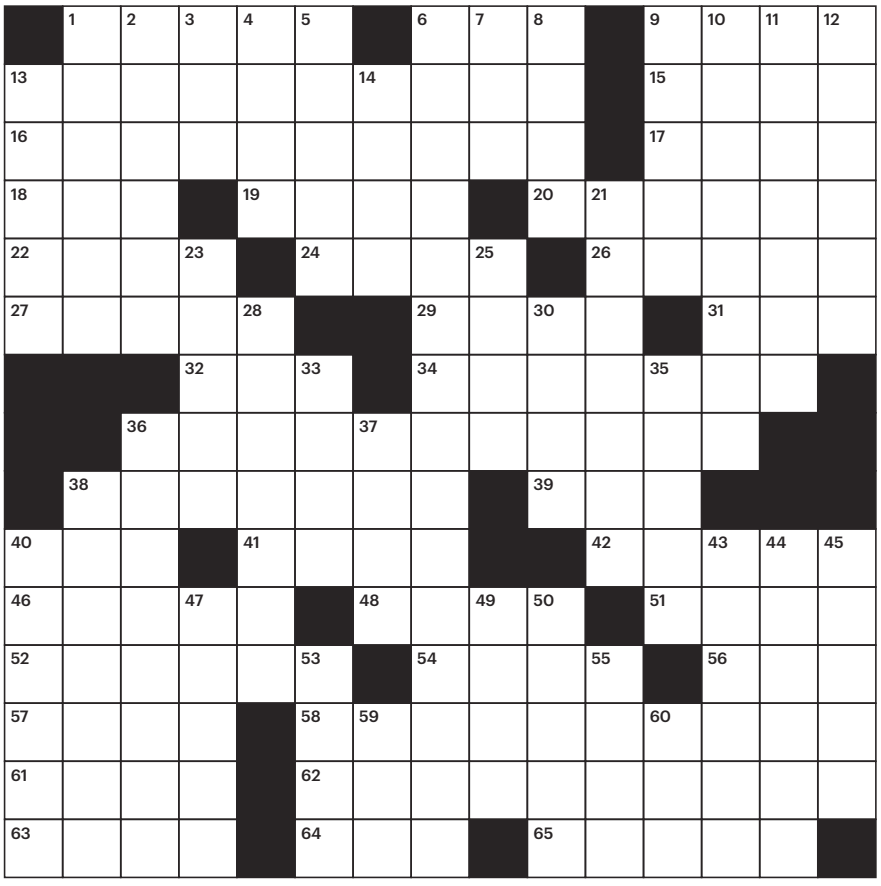
A HULU ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY CAITLIN REID



ACROSS

1 Times New ___
6 "___ dare you?!"
9 Tools for propelling a boat
13 Cocktail that might be served in a coconut with a miniature umbrella
15 Box-office bomb
16 Facing serious trouble
17 Hair style such as a bun or a French twist
18 Government org. that specializes in cryptology
19 Computer command symbolized by a floppy-disk icon
20 Fast-sounding reindeer on Santa's team
22 Change for a fifty, perhaps
24 Measurement that's nearly a metre
26 Intended
27 Threw in
29 Furniture facing a TV, at times
31 "Butter" K-pop band
32 Topaz, turquoise, or tourmaline
34 Treats
36 Technology that might change "werewolves" to "we're wolves"
38 Take the night to think over
39 Pair
40 Brief life story?
41 Element in glowing signs
42 Comes down in a blizzard
46 Proficient
48 Home turf?
51 Organize by category
52 Imposed, as a tax
54 Pointy part of a stiletto
56 Stretch the truth
57 Green vegetable in some potato soups
58 "Tell me about it!"
61 "Jane ___" (Charlotte Brontë novel)
62 Made a booty call?
63 Steeped beverages
64 Catch a glimpse of
65 Long heroic tales

DOWN

1 Washed the soap off of
2 Readily available
3 ___ Zedong (longtime Chinese chairman)
4 Sections of a play
5 "Get out of town!"
6 "Don't let the critics get to you"
7 Poem of homage
8 Any of seventeen districts in New Orleans
9 Helpful
10 Subject of a preschool lesson
11 ___ of unusual size (large ratlike creatures in "The Princess Bride")
12 Focus of ESPN's programming
13 Ship that sailed with the Niña and the Santa María
14 The floor is ___ (kids' game)
21 Oscar-winning film about Mozart
23 Smooth transition
25 Motorized part of a garage
28 Thawing of diplomatic tensions
30 Mustang and Bronco maker
33 Be down in the dumps
35 Images on a smartphone screen
36 Succulent plant with a soothing gel
37 "Sweet!"
38 Look of disdain
40 "Swan Lake" or "The Nutcracker"
43 "So fancy!"
44 Puts words to paper
45 Knight's trusty companion
47 ___ Peak (Colorado landmark)
49 Travelled
50 Tiny tart candies
53 "Mine!"
55 Role played by Carrie Fisher in the "Star Wars" franchise
59 Pool player's accessory
60 Streaming annoyance

Solution to the previous puzzle:

B	A	W	L	■	D	R	A	F	T	■	I	L	S	A
E	C	H	O	■	R	I	C	O	H	■	M	O	O	N
S	H	O	W	S	O	M	E	R	E	S	P	E	C	T
S	E	A	T	T	L	E	S	E	A	H	A	W	K	S
■	■	N	I	E	L	S	■	F	L	A	R	E	S	■
O	N	E	D	A	Y	■	G	R	A	N	T	■	■	■
D	O	L	E	D	■	F	R	O	M	E	■	C	A	T
E	E	L	S	■	B	R	U	N	O	■	C	A	R	E
S	L	Y	■	B	R	E	N	T	■	P	U	R	G	E
■	■	■	R	O	U	S	T	■	M	A	T	R	O	N
■	S	M	E	R	S	H	■	L	I	N	G	O	■	■
T	H	I	S	I	S	S	P	I	N	A	L	T	A	P
G	A	M	E	S	E	T	A	N	D	M	A	T	C	H
I	K	E	A	■	L	E	V	E	E	■	S	O	R	E
F	E	S	T	■	S	P	E	N	D	■	S	P	E	W

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